

Grammar Reference

Reported Speech

Meaning and use

If someone says something that you want to tell another person, you can report it using **direct speech** or **reported speech**.

In direct speech we use speech (or quotation) marks to show the exact words the person said.

"I'm hungry."

"I love chicken sandwiches."

We can also use a reporting verb to show who was speaking.

He **says**: "I'm hungry."

She **tells** me: "I love chicken sandwiches."

Say and **tell** are both reporting verbs. We use **tell** when we say who we are speaking to.

CORRECT: *She **tells me** she loves chicken sandwiches.* (The speaker is talking to 'me'.)

CORRECT: *She **says** she loves chicken sandwiches.* (We don't know who the speaker is talking to.)

WRONG: *She **says me** she loves chicken sandwiches.* (We don't use 'me' with the reporting verb 'say'.)

CORRECT: *She said **TO me** she loves chicken.*

If the reporting verb is in the present tense, then the reported statement stays in the present tense:

Direct speech

"*He's hungry*", he **says**.

She **tells** me, "*I love chicken sandwiches.*"

Reported speech

He **says** he **is** hungry.

She **tells** me she **loves** chicken sandwiches.

If the reporting verb is in the past tense, we usually change the present form to a past form in reported speech.

Direct speech

"*He's hungry*", he **said**.

She **told** me, "*I love chicken sandwiches.*"

Reported speech

He **said** he **was** hungry.

She **told** me she **loved** chicken sandwiches.

We change the pronoun when the speaker or listener changes.

A boy tells his mother: "*I'm hungry.*"

Later, the boy's mother tells the father: *He said he was hungry.*

We can use **that**, but we can also miss it out and the meaning is the same.

He said **that** he was hungry. > He said he was hungry.

She told me **that** she loved chicken sandwiches. > She told me she loved chicken sandwiches.

Form

In reported speech, we usually move the direct speech verb one step back in the past.

1) Present simple -> past simple

"*I know you.*" -> She said she **knew** him.

2) Present continuous -> past continuous

"*I am having coffee*" -> He said he **was having** coffee.

3) Present perfect -> past perfect

"I **have finished** my homework" -> He said he **had finished** his homework.

4) Present perfect continuous -> past perfect continuous

"I **have been studying** Chinese" -> She said she **had been studying** Chinese.

5) Is going to -> was going to

"I **am going** to go home" -> She said she **was going to go** home.

6) Future simple -> would

"I **will go** to the bank later" -> He said he **would go** to the bank later.

Notes

1) A reported statement in the **past simple** often stays the same:

"I **drove** to work" -> She said she **drove** to work.

2) And you can't go further back in time than the **past perfect**, so it stays the same too:

"I **had driven** to work" -> She said she **had driven** to work.

3) **Modal verbs**: some change in reported speech:

"I **can/can't** speak Turkish" -> She said she **could/couldn't** speak Turkish.

"I **must/mustn't** wash my hair" -> She said she **had to/didn't have to** wash her hair.

4) Some modal verbs don't change:

"I **could** take the bus" -> He said he **could** take the bus.

"I **should** go to bed" -> She said she **should** go to bed.

"I **might** watch TV" -> He said he **might** watch TV.

5) We don't change the verb in reported speech if the situation hasn't changed, for example if it's a fact or is generally true:

"I **love** you" -> She told me she **loves** me.

6) But we can use the past tense to show you're not certain the other person loves her/him – for example, the other person wasn't telling the truth

"I love you" -> She said she **loved** me.

Questions

A **direct question** is:

Where are you from?

A **reported question** is:

He asked where I was from.

To form a reported question, you need to follow these steps:

1) Use a reporting verb:

*He **asked** where I was from.*

2) Repeat the question word:

*He asked **where** I was from.*

3) Change the pronouns:

*He asked where **I** was from.*

4) Move the tense back:

*He asked where I **was** from.*

5) Use statement word order:

*He asked where **I was from**.*

Note: Yes/no questions

For **yes/no questions**, we use **if** or **whether**.

Example: *Is it two o'clock?*

She asked if it was two o'clock

She asked whether it was two o'clock

Form summary

Positive

"I **love** you." > He said he **loved** her.

"I'**ve been working** hard." > She told me that she'**d been working** hard.

"I'**ll see** you later." > He said he **would see** me later.

Negative

"I **didn't have** time to go shopping." > He said he **hadn't had** time to go shopping. "I **can't talk** to you." > She told me that she **couldn't talk** to me.

"I **wouldn't want** to live in the country." > He said he **wouldn't want** to live in the country.

Question

"Where **can** I buy a hamburger?" > She asked **where** she **could** buy a hamburger.

"Who **must** I see at the bank?" > He asked **who** he **had to** see at the bank.

"**Are you going** to Leila's party?" > She asked **if** I **was going** to Leila's party.

Short answers

"Yes, I am. / No, I'm not." > **I said I was. / I said I wasn't.**

Take note: facts and general truths We don't change the verb in reported speech if the situation hasn't changed, for example if it's a fact or is generally true. Compare:

*She **told me she loves me.*** (The speaker uses the present tense to show (s)he believes the other person still loves her/him now.)

*She **told me she loved me.*** (The speaker uses the past tense to show (s)he isn't certain the other person loves her/him – for example, the other person wasn't telling the truth.)

Take note: the past perfect

The past perfect doesn't change in reported speech because there isn't a verb form further 'back in time'.

"I **had never eaten sushi before I went to Japan.**" > '*She told me that she **had never eaten sushi before she went to Japan.***

Take note: reporting verbs

We can use different verbs to report our thoughts, opinions or intentions.

"I know which way to go." -> He **thought** he knew which way to go.

"I stole the books." -> He **admitted** that he had stolen the books.

"Why doesn't she like me?" -> He **wondered** why she didn't like him.

Spoken English

Some contracted forms in reported speech can be difficult to hear, for example the past perfect and conditional. *He asked **who'd eaten the cake.** I told him **he'd have to take the train.*** In the first example, the words 'who' and 'had' become **who'd**. In the second example, 'he' and 'would' become **he'd**. In both examples, two different words are shortened to just a /d/ sound. So, listen carefully for past tense contractions – make sure you get them right.

