Definition

Reported speech is how we represent the speech of other people or what we ourselves say. There are two main types of reported speech: direct speech and indirect speech.

Direct speech repeats the exact words the person used, or how we remember their words:

Examples:

Mr.Barry said, **"I didn't realise it was midnight."**

In indirect speech, the original speaker's words are changed.

Mr.Barry said **she hadn't realised it was midnight**.

In this example, I becomes she and the verb tense reflects the fact that time has passed since the words were spoken: didn't realise becomes hadn't realised.

Indirect speech focuses more on the content of what someone said rather than their exact words:

"I'm sorry," *said Umar. (Direct)*

Umar **apologised**. *(Indirect: report of a speech act)*

In a similar way, we can report what people wrote or thought:

'I will love you forever,' *he wrote, and then posted the note through Alice's door. (Direct report of what someone wrote)*

He wrote **that he would love her forever**, *and then posted the note through Alice's door. (Indirect report of what someone wrote)*

I need a new direction in life, *she thought. (Direct report of someone's thoughts)*

*She thought **that she needed a new direction in life**. (Indirect report of someone's thoughts).*

Reported speech: reporting and reported clauses

Speech reports consist of two parts: the reporting clause and the reported clause. The reporting clause includes a verb such as say, tell, ask, reply, shout, usually in the past simple, and the reported clause includes what the original speaker said.

Example:

reporting clause	reported clause
*William **said,***	*"I need your help."*
*Then a man **shouted,***	*"Get out of there, fast!"*
*The postman **said***	*He had a package for us.*
*Clarissa **told me***	*She's thinking of moving to Canada.*

Reported speech: punctuation

Direct speech

In direct speech we usually put a comma between the reporting clause and the reported clause. The words of the original speaker are enclosed in inverted commas, either single ('...') or double ("..."). If the reported clause comes first, we put the comma inside the inverted commas:

Example:

"I couldn't sleep last night," he said.

Fanta said, 'I don't need you anymore.'

If the direct speech is a question or exclamation, we use a question mark or exclamation mark, not a comma:

'Is there a reason for this?' she asked.

"I hate you!" he shouted.

We sometimes use a colon (:) between the reporting clause and the reported clause when the reporting clause is first:

The officer replied: 'It is not possible to see the General. He's busy.'

Warning:

In indirect speech it is more common for the reporting clause to come first. When the reporting clause is first, we don't put a comma between the reporting clause and the reported clause. When the reporting clause comes after the reported clause, we use a comma to separate the two parts:

She told me they had left her without any money.

Not: ~~She told me, they had left her without any money~~.

Nobody had gone in or out during the previous hour, he informed us.

Warning:

We don't use question marks or exclamation marks in indirect reports of questions and exclamations:

He asked me why I was so upset.

Not: ~~He asked me why I was so upset?~~

Reported speech: reporting verbs

Say and tell

We can use say and tell to report statements in direct speech, but say is more common. We don't always mention the person being spoken to with say, but if we do mention them, we use a prepositional phrase with to (to me, to Lorna):

*'I'll give you a ring tomorrow,' she **said**.*

*'Try to stay calm,' she **said to us** in a low voice.*

Not: ~~'Try to stay calm,' she said us in a low voice~~.

With tell, we always mention the person being spoken to; we use an indirect object (underlined):

*'Enjoy yourselves,' he **told** <u>them</u>.*

Not: ~~'Enjoy yourselves,' he told~~.

In indirect speech, say and tell are both common as reporting verbs. We don't use an indirect object with say, but we always use an indirect object (underlined) with tell:

*He **said** he was moving to New Zealand.*

Not: ~~He said me he was moving to New Zealand~~.

*He **told** <u>me</u> he was moving to New Zealand.*

Not: ~~He told he was moving to New Zealand~~.

We use say, but not tell, to report questions:

*'Are you going now?' she **said**.*

Not: ~~'Are you going now?' she told me~~.

We use say, not tell, to report greetings, congratulations and other wishes:

*'Happy birthday!' she **said**.*

Not: ~~Happy birthday!' she told me~~.

*Everyone **said** good luck to me as I went into the interview.*

Not: ~~Everyone told me good luck~~ …

Other reporting verbs

Add	comment	explain	offer	state
Admit	complain	hint	order	suggest
Advise	confess	inform	point out	threaten
Agree	confirm	insist	promise	warn
Announce	continue	interrupt	protest	wonder
Answer	cry (= shout)	maintain	repeat	
Ask	demand	note	reply	
Claim	enquire	observe	shout	

Reported speech: direct speech

Direct speech is a representation of the actual words someone said. A direct speech report usually has a reporting verb in the past simple. The most common reporting verb is said. The reporting clause may come first or second.

reporting clause first	reported clause	reporting clause second
Mussa **said**,	'Let me have a look.'	
Then the child **asked**,	'Are there any toys?'	
	'Hand it over at once!'	He **demanded**.
	'I believe that too,'	She **added**.

The reporting clause may sometimes come in the middle of the reported clause, especially in literary styles:

"No," **she said**, "I've never seen it before."

'Was it,' **he asked**, 'the first time you had spoken to Mrs Dalton?'

We can use adverbs with the reporting verb to describe the way someone said something. This is more common when the reporting clause comes second:

"I will not accept it!" he said **angrily.**

'Can I speak to the doctor?' she asked **rather nervously**

Reported speech: indirect speech

Indirect speech focuses more on the content of what someone said rather than their exact words. In indirect speech, the structure of the reported clause depends on whether the speaker is reporting a statement, a question or a command.

	direct	*Indirect*	*reported clause*
statement	'I'm tired,' I said.	I told them (**that**) **I was tired**.	*that-clause*
question	'Are you ready?' the nurse asked Joel. 'Who are you?' she asked.	The nurse asked Joel **if/whether he was ready**. She asked me **who I was**.	*if-clause/whether-clause* *wh-clause*
command	'Leave at once!' they ordered.	They ordered us **to leave at once**.	*to-infinitive clause*

Indirect speech: reporting statements

Indirect reports of statements consist of a reporting clause and a that-clause. We often omit that, especially in informal situations:

*The pilot commented **that** the weather had been extremely bad as the plane came in to land. (The pilot's words were: 'The weather was extremely bad as the plane came in to land.')*

I told my wife I didn't want a party on my 50th birthday. (That-clause without that) (Or I told my wife that I didn't want a party on my 50th birthday.)

Indirect speech: reporting questions

Reporting yes-no questions and alternative questions

Indirect reports of yes-no questions and questions with or consist of a reporting clause and a reported clause introduced by if or whether. If is more common than whether. The reported clause is in statement form (subject + verb), not question form:

*She asked **if** [S] [V] I was Scottish. (Original yes-no question: 'Are you Scottish?')*

*The waiter asked **whether** [S]we [V]wanted a table near the window. (Original yes-no question: 'Do you want a table near the window?)*

*He asked me **if** [S] [V] I had come by train or by bus. (Original alternative question: 'Did you come by train or by bus?')*

Reporting wh-questions

Indirect reports of wh-questions consist of a reporting clause, and a reported clause beginning with a wh-word (who, what, when, where, why, how). We don't use a question mark:

*He asked me **what** I wanted.*

Not: ~~He asked me what I wanted?~~

The reported clause is in statement form (subject + verb), not question form:

*She wanted to know who [S]**we** [V]**had** invited to the party.*

Not: … ~~who had we invited~~ …

Who, whom and what

In indirect questions with who, whom and what, the wh-word may be the subject or the object of the reported clause:

*I asked them **who** came to meet them at the airport. (who is the subject of came; original question: 'Who came to meet you at the airport?')*

*He wondered **what** the repairs would cost. (what is the object of cost; original question: 'What will the repairs cost?')*

The reported clause is in statement form (subject + verb), not question form:

*She asked us **what** [S]**we** [V]**were doing**. (original question: 'What are you doing?')*

Not: ~~She asked us what were we doing?~~

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When, where, why and how

We also use statement word order (subject + verb) with when, where, why and how:

*I asked her **when** [S]**it** [V]**had happened** (original question: 'When did it happen?').*

Not: ~~I asked her when had it happened?~~

*I asked her **where** [S]**the bus station** [V]**was**. (original question: 'Where is the bus station?')*

Not: ~~I asked her where was the bus station?~~

*The teacher asked them **how** [S]**they** [V]**wanted to do the activity**. (original question: 'How do you want to do the activity?')*

Not: ~~The teacher asked them how did they want to do the activity?~~

Indirect speech: reporting commands

Indirect reports of commands consist of a reporting clause, and a reported clause beginning with a to-infinitive:

*The General ordered the troops **to advance**. (Original command: 'Advance!')*

*The chairperson told him **to sit down** and **to stop interrupting**. (Original command: 'Sit down and stop interrupting!')*

We also use a to-infinitive clause in indirect reports with other verbs that mean wanting or getting people to do something, for example, advise, encourage, and warn:

*They advised me **to wait** till the following day. (Original statement: 'You should wait till the following day.')*

*The guard warned us **not to enter** the area. (Original statement: 'You must not enter the area.')*

Indirect speech: present simple reporting verb

We can use the reporting verb in the present simple in indirect speech if the original words are still true or relevant at the time of reporting, or if the report is of something someone often says or repeats:

*Sheila **says** they're closing the motorway tomorrow for repairs.*

*Henry **tells** me he's thinking of getting married next year.*

*Rupert **says** dogs shouldn't be allowed on the beach. (Rupert probably often repeats this statement.)*

Indirect speech: past continuous reporting verb

In indirect speech, we can use the past continuous form of the reporting verb (usually say or tell). This happens mostly in conversation, when the speaker wants to focus on the content of the report, usually because it is interesting news or important information, or because it is a new topic in the conversation:

*Ahsan **was telling** me the big cinema in James Street is going to close down. Is that true?*

*Malik **was saying** that book sales have gone up a lot this year thanks to the Internet.*

Backshift

'Backshift' refers to the changes we make to the original verbs in indirect speech because time has passed between the moment of speaking and the time of the report.

direct speech	indirect speech
*I said, 'I**'m not** very happy at work.'*	*I told her I **was not** very happy at work.*
*They said: 'We**'re going** home.'*	*They told us they **were going** home.*

direct speech	indirect speech
He said, 'Jane **will** be late.'	He said that Jane **would** be late.
'**I've been working**,' she said.	She said she **had been working**.
'What **happened** to make her so angry?' he asked.	He asked what **had happened** to make her so angry.

In these examples, the present (am) has become the past (was), the future (will) has become the future-in-the-past (would) and the past (happened) has become the past perfect (had happened). The tenses have 'shifted' or 'moved back' in time.

Backshift changes

Direct		indirect
present simple	→	past simple
present continuous	→	past continuous
present perfect simple	→	past perfect simple
present perfect continuous	→	past perfect continuous
past simple	→	past perfect simple

Direct		indirect
past continuous	→	past perfect continuous
future (will)	→	future-in-the-past (would)
past perfect	↔	past perfect (no change)

The past perfect does not shift back; it stays the same:

Direct speech	Indirect speech
He asked: '**Had** the girls already **left**?'	He asked if the girls **had already left.**

Modal verbs

Some, but not all, modal verbs 'shift back' in time and change in indirect speech.

	direct speech	indirect speech	change
will	'We **will** be there,' he promised.	He promised they **would** be there.	will becomes would
shall	She said, 'I **shall** need	She said she **would** nee	shall usually becomes would in reported

	direct speech	indirect speech	change
	more money.' '**Shall** I open it?' she asked.	d more money. She asked if she **should** open it.	questions, shall becomes should
can	'I **can** see you at 2.30,' he added.	He added that he **could** see me at 2.30.	can becomes could
may	'I **may** be back later,' she said. 'You **may** wait in the hallway,' he said.	She said she **might** be back later. He said we **could** wait in the hallway.	may (possibility) becomes might may (permission) becomes could
must	She said, 'You **must** pay by 30th April.' 'It **must** be awful to live in such a noisy place,' she said.	She said we **had to** pay by 30th April. She said it **must** be awful to live in such a noisy place.	must (obligation) usually becomes had to must (speculation) does not change

	direct speech	indirect speech	change
could	'We **could** sell it for about 2,000 euros,' he said.	He said they **could** sell it for about 2,000 euros.	no change
should	'You **should** go there immediately,' she said.	She said I **should** go there immediately.	no change
would	'I **would** buy it if I had the money,' he said.	He said he **would** buy it if he had the money.	no change
might	'It **might** snow tonight,' he warned.	He warned that it **might** snow that night.	no change
need	'You **needn't** come till six o'clock,' he said.	He said we **needn't** come till six o'clock.	no change

We can use a perfect form with have + -ed form after modal verbs, especially where the report looks back to a hypothetical event in the past:

*He said the noise **might have been** the postman delivering letters. (original statement: 'The noise might be the postman delivering letters.')*

*He said he **would have helped** us if we'd needed a volunteer. (original statement: 'I'll help you if you need a volunteer' or 'I'd help you if you needed a volunteer.')*

Used to and ought to do not change in indirect speech:

*She said she **used to** live in Oxford. (original statement: 'I used to live in Oxford.')*

*The guard warned us that we **ought to** leave immediately. (original statement: 'You ought to leave immediately.')*

No backshift

We don't need to change the tense in indirect speech if what a person said is still true or relevant or has not happened yet. This often happens when someone talks about the future, or when someone uses the present simple, present continuous or present perfect in their original words:

*He **told** me his brother **works** for an Italian company. (It is still true that his brother works for an Italian company.)*

*She **said** she**'s getting** married next year. (For the speakers, the time at the moment of speaking is 'this year'.)*

*He **said** he**'s finished** painting the door. (He probably said it just a short time ago.)*

*She promised she**'ll help** us. (The promise applies to the future.)*

Indirect speech: changes to pronouns

Changes to personal pronouns in indirect reports depend on whether the person reporting the speech and the person(s) who said the original words are the same or different.

Direct	indirect	
'*I* don't want to shock people,' *Tom* said.	*Tom* said *he* didn't want to shock people.	*different speakers (I changes to he)*
'*I'll* look after Toby,' *I* said.	*I* said *I* would look after Toby.	*same speaker (no change)*
'*You* need to be here at nine o'clock,' *Assia* told Beatrice.	*A* told Beatrice *she* needed to be there at nine o'clock.	*different speakers (you changes to she)*
'*I* hope *you* will join us tonight,' *I* said to James.	*I* told James *I* hoped *he* would join us that night.	*same speaker (no change to I; you changes to he)*

Indirect speech: changes to adverbs and demonstratives

We often change demonstratives (this, that) and adverbs of time and place (now, here, today, etc.) because indirect speech happens at a later time than the original speech, and perhaps in a different place.

direct speech	indirect speech
I said, 'I'll meet you **here tomorrow**.'	I told her I would meet her **there the next/following day**.
She said, 'I do not wish to discuss it **at this moment in time**.'	She said she did not wish to discuss it **at that moment in time**.
He said, "I want it **now**."	He said he wanted it **then/at that moment**.
'I finished the job **three weeks ago**,' the boy protested.	The boy protested that he had finished the job **three weeks before**.

Typical changes to demonstratives, adverbs and adverbial expressions

direct		Indirect
this	→	That
these	→	Those
now	→	Then
yesterday	→	the day before

direct		Indirect
tomorrow	→	the next/following day
two weeks ago	→	two weeks before
here	→	There

Indirect speech: typical errors

- *The word order in indirect reports of wh-questions is the same as statement word order (subject + verb), not question word order:*

She always asks me **where** *[S] [V]***I am going**.

Not: ~~She always asks me where am I going~~.

1. We don't use a question mark when reporting wh-questions:

I asked him what he was doing.

Not: ~~I asked him what he was doing?~~