

Direct and Indirect speech with rules and examples

In English, to report someone's words or their own words, you can use direct or indirect speech. These may include statements, questions, orders, advice...

When moving from direct to indirect style, it is often necessary to change personal pronouns, demonstrative and possessive pronouns according to who says what:

- *I* → *he / she*
- *me* → *him / her*
- *my* → *his / her*
- *we* → *they*
- *this* → *that*
- *us* → *them*
- *mine* → *his / hers*
- *ours* → *theirs*
- *our* → *their*

Here are some examples:

Direct speeches	Indirect speeches
She says: "My dad likes onion soup."	She says that her dad likes onion soup.
Kevin said, 'I'm tired.'	Kevin said (that) he was tired.
Have you ever been to Japan?	She asked me if I had ever been to Japan.
Open the door!	He told me to open the door.

Note: **That** is often implied in indirect discourse. It is not mandatory to use it, so it is indicated in brackets in this lesson.

Introductory verbs

To relate someone's words to both direct and indirect speech, you need an introductory verb.

The two most frequent are tell and say, but there are many other possible ones like:

- *ask*
- *reply*
- *warn*
- *answer*
- *point out*
- *state*
- *write*
- *add*
- *exclaim*
- *protest*

- *report*
- *explain*
- *think*
- *admit*
- *declare*
- *mention*
- *suggest*
- *advise*
- *claim*
- *forbid*
- *order*
- *hope*
- *inquire*
- *want to know*
- *wonder*

Say or tell ?

Be careful to **distinguish SAY from TELL**. The two verbs may have the same meaning, but their use is different. With TELL, the interlocutor is quoted: the name or pronoun is placed immediately after tell (tell somebody something).

With SAY, the interlocutor is not necessarily quoted; if he is, he is introduced by the preposition **to** (*say something to somebody*):

- He says (that) he is English.
- He tells me (that) he is English.

However, tell is used in some expressions without mentioning a contact person:

- tell the truth
- tell a story
- tell the time

Note: the wording '*He said to me...*' is possible but seems clumsy. It is best to use '*He told me...*'.

TIMES MODIFICATIONS

The shift to indirect discourse leads to changes in the tense, depending on whether the verb is in the present tense or in the past tense.

If the introductory verb is in the present tense, the tense (or modal) does not change.

- "I'm sorry." → He says he is sorry.
- "I hate driving" → He says he hates driving.

Be careful, if the statements reported are still true now you must not change the tense!

- He said this morning (that) he hates driving. (= He still hates driving now).

If the introductory verb is in the past, the verb tense changes:

Examples of major changes in time:

Direct speeches	Indirect speeches
Present simple He said: "I am happy"	Preterite He said (that) he was happy.
Present continue / progressive He said: "I m looking for my phone"	Past Continuous He said (that) he was looking for his phone.
Preterite He said: "I visited Paris last year"	Past Perfect Simple He said (that) he had visited Paris the previous year.
Present Perfect He said: " I've lived in London for a long time "	Past Perfect He said (that) he had lived in London for a long time.
Past Perfect He said: "They had cleaned the kitchen when I arrived "	Past Perfect He said (that) they had cleaned the kitchen when he had arrived .
Past Continuous He said: "I was watching TV when the accident occurred "	Past Perfect Continuous He said (that) he had been watching TV when the accident had occurred .
Present Perfect Progressive He said: "I have been swimming for one hours."	Past Perfect Continuous He said (that) he had been swimming for one hours.
Past Perfect Continuous He said: "I had been reading a book when the light went off "	Past Perfect Continuous He said (that) he had been reading a book when the light had gone off .
Future simple (will+verb) He said: "I will open the door."	Conditional (would+verb) He said (that) he would open the door.
Conditional (would+verb) He said: "I would buy a plane if I were rich"	Conditional (would+verb) He said (that) he would buy a plane if he had been rich.

MODALS

The modals *could, should, would, might, needn't, ought to, used to* don't change when used with indirect speech.

Those who change are **will** → **would**, **can** → **could**, **may** → **might**:

- I will come with you. → Tina promised she would come with me.
- I can help you. → He said he could help me.
- It may be a good idea. → I thought it might be a good idea.

Modals	Direct speeches	Indirect speeches
will	"They will call you."	He told her that they would call her.
would*	"I would help, but I'm sick."	She said (that) she would help but she was sick.
can	"I can do it."	He said he could do it.
could*	"I could swim when I was four"	She said (that) she could swim when she was four.

should*	"I should call my mother"	She said (that) she should call her mother.
may	"May I go out?"	He wanted to know if he might go out.
must	"She must apply for the job."	He said that she must/had to apply for the job.

* do not change

TIME, PLACE AND DEMONSTRATIVE MARKERS

Expressions of time, place and demonstratives change if the context of indirect speech is different from that of direct speech.

She said "I saw him yesterday." → She said she had seen him the day before.

Direct speeches	Indirect speeches
Time marker	
today	that day
now	then
yesterday	the day before
... days ago	... days before
last week	the week before
next week	the following week
next year	the following year
tomorrow	the next day / the following day
Location marker	
here	there
Demonstrative	
this	that
these	those

Orders and prohibitions to indirect discourse

To relate an order or prohibition to indirect discourse, verbs such as tell, order or forbid are used... Be careful, remember to replace Don't by NOT when it is the main verb of the sentence!

For affirmative sentences, use *to + infinitive*

For negative sentences use *not to + infinitive*

- Don't worry! → He told her not to worry.
- He said, "go to bed!" → He ordered the child to go to bed.
- Don't marry him! → She forbade me to marry him.

- Please don't be late. → She asked us not to be late.

Questions to the indirect discourse

If there is an interrogative word like where/who/when/why... in direct speech, we keep it in indirect speech:

- What are you doing? → She asked me what I was doing.
- Who was that beautiful woman? → He asked me who that beautiful woman had been.
- Where do you live? → He wanted to know where I lived.
- "Why don't you speak Spanish?" → He asked me why I didn't speak Spanish.

If it is a closed-ended question or you have to answer yes/no, you use *if* or *whether*:

- "Do you like chocolate?" → She asked me if I liked chocolate.
- "Are you living here?" → She asked me if I was living here.
- "Have you ever been to Paris?" → He asked me if I had ever been to Paris.

When the question contains a modal, it is preterite in the reported question:

- How will he react? → He wondered how he would react.

Some examples of indirect questions:

- I wondered what they were talking about.
- I don't know if they'll come or not.

OTHER CHANGES

Expressions of advice such as *must*, *should* and *ought* are usually reported using the verbs *advise* or *urge*:

- "You must read this book." → He advised / urged me to read that book.

The expression *let's* is usually reported using the verb *suggest*, with gerund or with *should*:

- "Let's go to the cinema." → He suggested going to the cinema. OR He suggested that we should go to the cinema.