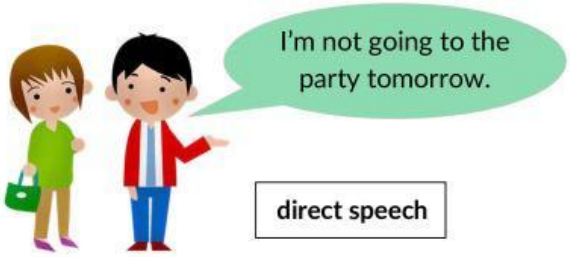
Reported Speech (B1)

Introduction

When we want to tell somebody what another person has said, we don't usually use the original speaker's exact words (direct speech). We use reported (indirect) speech. When we use reported speech, we have to make various changes to the original sentence. Look at the two conversations below. What differences can you find between the original sentence and the reported sentence?



direct speech

reported speech

Reporting Statements

When a statement is reported we need to consider the following:

A. We need to use an introductory clause with a reporting verb:

There are many verbs used for reporting statements. The most common of these verbs are ***say*** & ***tell***.

'I'm not going to the party tomorrow.' ⇨ *He said that he wasn't going to the party the next day.*

B. The pronouns change:

The subject and/or object pronouns and possessive adjectives may be different.

'I'm not going to the party tomorrow.' ⇨ *He said that he wasn't going to the party the next day.*

C. The tense may change:

We often have to change the tense when we are reporting, but this is not always the case.

'I'm not going to the party tomorrow.' ⇨ *He said that he wasn't going to the party the next day.*

D. The time and place phrases may change:

If times or places, referred to in the original sentence, have changed, they will change when reported.

'I'm not going to the party tomorrow.' ⇨ *He said that he wasn't going to the party the next day.*

Ex 1: Underline any changes you can see in the reported statements below.

Direct Speech:		Reported Speech:
1. I work in a restaurant here.	⇨	She said that she worked in a restaurant there.
2. I don't like cheese.	⇨	She told me that she didn't like cheese.
3. I'm not going out tonight.	⇨	He said that he wasn't going out that night.
4. We will pay the bill tomorrow.	⇨	They told us they would pay the bill the next day.

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Say & Tell

We often use the verbs ***say*** & ***tell*** in the introductory clause in reported speech, so it's important to know which one to use and the structures which follow them.

What is the difference between 'say' and 'tell'?

Tell and ***say*** are very similar and can often be used interchangeably.

Say basically means that words leave your mouth/you speak, while ***tell*** means that you give information, an instruction or an account of something. The focus of ***say*** is on the actual word/words, while the focus of ***tell*** is on the content of the words (*the information, instruction, or account contained in what someone has said*).

Look at the examples below:

- *They told me that they lived in number 25.* ✓ **(The focus is on the information)**
- *They said that they lived in number 25.* ✓ **(This is also correct, but the focus is on the actual words)**

In the above example, we can see that ***say*** & ***tell*** can be used interchangeably, but this isn't always the case.

Look at the example below:

- *He said 'yes'.* ✓ **(other examples = no, hi, hello, ouch, goodbye)**
- *He told me 'yes'.* ✗ **('yes' is simply a word; it is not information, an instruction or an account)**

Use of 'say' with direct speech:

We usually use ***say*** (not ***tell***) with direct speech as the focus is on the actual words.

Look at the example below:

- *He said 'We live in number 25'.* ✓
- *He told me 'We live in number 25'.* ✗

Structures which follow 'say' & 'tell':

The general rule is...

- We **say** something.
- We **tell** somebody something.

Note: The use of ***that*** is optional.

- *He said that he worked there.* ✓
- *He said he worked there.* ✓

'Say' can be followed with...

a) **direct speech:** *He said 'I want to go home'.* b) **a 'that' clause:** *He said (that) he wanted to go home.*

c) **to + indirect object + 'that' clause:** *He said to me (that) he wanted to go home.*

One of the most common errors learners make is to use an indirect object (an object pronoun: *me, him, us*, etc. or a noun: *John, the children*, etc.), after ***say***. ***Say*** is not followed by an indirect object.

However, it is possible to use an indirect object with ***say*** after the preposition ***to.***

- *He said me that he wanted to go home.* ✗
- *He said to me (that) he wanted to go home.* ✓

'Tell' is followed with...

a) **indirect object + 'that' clause:** *He told me (that) he wanted to go home.*

b) **indirect object + infinitive:** *He told me to sit down.*

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Another common error learners make is to omit an indirect object (usually an object pronoun; *me*, *him*, *us* etc.) after ***tell***. ***Tell*** must be followed by an indirect object.

- *He told that he wanted to go home.* ✗
- *He told me (that) he wanted to go home.* ✓

Fixed expressions with 'tell':

There are a few fixed expressions with ***tell***. The most common of these are...

tell a story	tell a joke	tell a lie	tell the truth	tell the time	tell the future

Remember, we can't use these expressions with ***say***.

- *Kurt told a lie.* ✓
- *Kurt said a lie.* ✗

Although the rule is to follow ***tell*** with an indirect object, in some of the cases with these fixed expressions, the indirect object is optional.

Study the examples below:

- My granny told (us) a great story.
- My son is learning to tell the time.
- Harry told (me) a lie.
- Kate always tells (me) the truth.
- Nobody can tell the future. Whatever will be, will be.

Ex 2: Decide if the following sentences are right/wrong and correct the wrong ones.

1. They told me to complete a form. ☑ _____.
2. She said me that her name was Karen. ☐ _____.
3. I told to her to calm down. ☐ _____.
4. He said that he wasn't hungry. ☐ _____.
5. We told her a bedtime story. ☐ _____.
6. He said the truth about what had happened. ☐ _____.
7. He said to me that he loved chocolate. ☐ _____.
8. She told me hello. ☐ _____.
9. She told that her name was Francesca. ☐ _____.

Tense Changes / Backshift

The general rule when we report what was said is to move back one tense. This is called the 'backshift'.

present simple: *I go to school here.*	⇨	**past simple:** *He said (that) he went to school there.*
present continuous: *I'm watching a film.*	⇨	**past continuous:** *She said (that) she was watching a film.*
present perfect simple: *I have been to France.*	⇨	**past perfect simple:** *She said (that) she had been to France.*
present perfect continuous: *I have been working hard.*	⇨	**past perfect continuous:** *He said (that) he had been working hard.*

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past simple: *Lucy gave me a key.*	⇨	**past perfect simple:** *She said (that) Lucy had given her a key.*
past continuous: *John was playing golf.*	⇨	**past perfect continuous:** *He said (that) John had been playing golf.*
past perfect simple: *I had been there before.*	⇨	**past perfect simple:** *She said (that) she had been there before.*
am/is/are going to: *I am going to buy a car.*	⇨	**was/were going to** *He said (that) he was going to buy a car.*
will: *I will make the dinner.*	⇨	**would:** *She said (that) she would make the dinner.*
can: *I can speak Spanish.*	⇨	**could:** *He said (that) he could speak Spanish.*
imperative: *Close the door.*	⇨	**infinitive:** *He told me to close the door.*

Ex 3: Test your partner!

In pairs, take turns to cover the tables, and test each other on the backshifts. Can you remember them?

Time & Place Changes

Another important thing you need to check is whether or not the times and places in direct speech have changed at the time of reporting. If they have, you will need to change them in the reported speech.

Jenny & Frank at a shopping centre.

Carla & Jenny in the park three weeks later.

Ex 4: What might happen to the following time and place phrases in reported speech?

now ⇨
today ⇨
yesterday ⇨
last night ⇨
[number] days/weeks ago ⇨
last week/month etc ⇨

tomorrow ⇨
next week/month etc. ⇨
here ⇨
this (time) ⇨
this/that (adjectives) ⇨
these ⇨

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Changes to Pronouns & Possessive Adjectives

Don't forget that you may need to change the following:

- subject pronouns
- object pronouns
- possessive pronouns
- possessive adjectives

In general, personal pronouns change to the third person singular or plural, except when the speaker reports his/her own words. You may also need to change possessive adjectives (*my, your, his, her*, etc.)

He said 'I love your new shoes'. → *He told her that he loved her new shoes.*

She said 'That bag is mine'. → *She said that the bag was hers.*

Ex 5: Change these statements into reported speech. Start with 'He said...'

Imagine that the original conversations take place a long time before they are reported, so use the backshift and change the time and place phrases where necessary. Also, don't forget to change the pronouns where necessary.

1. I teach English online. ⇨ He said (that) he taught English online.
2. They have just gone out. ⇨ _____.
3. I was watching TV all night. ⇨ _____.
4. I will call you when the film is over. ⇨ _____.
5. I went to Switzerland on holiday last year. ⇨ _____.
6. We bake cakes for the shop on Wednesdays. ⇨ _____.
7. My sister can speak Italian. ⇨ _____.
8. We are going to go to the cinema tomorrow. ⇨ _____.
9. I had already eaten dinner. ⇨ _____.
10. John is playing tennis now. ⇨ _____.

Exceptions to Tense Changes

We usually change the tense if the introductory clause is in the Past Simple but we don't change the tense if the introductory clause is in the Present Simple.

'I work here' → ***He said*** *that he worked there.* *'I work here'* → ***He says*** *that he works here.*

Backshift is **optional** when the situation hasn't changed or if you agree with the original speaker.

'New York isn't a state' → *He said New York* ***isn't/wasn't*** *a state.*

'I'm going out tonight' → *He said he* ***is/was*** *going out tonight.* **('tonight' is still in the future)**

Backshift of the Past Simple and Past Continuous don't usually occur in cases where they can't be mistaken for backshift of the Present Simple or Present Continuous. This is the case when there is a time expression indicating past which still applies at the time of reporting. Compare the examples below.

'I ***am playing*** *golf'.* → *He said that he* ***was playing*** *golf.*

'I ***was playing*** *golf last week'.* → *He said that he* ***was playing*** *golf last week.*

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Ex 6: Complete the reported speech sentences, and answer the question below.

Imagine that the original conversations take place moments before they are reported. Don't use the backshift. Don't change the time phrases, but don't forget to change the pronouns where necessary.

1. Jenny has eaten all the cake. ⇨ He says _____.
2. I can't find my wallet. ⇨ He says _____.
3. Frank loves blue cheese. ⇨ He says _____.
4. I'm staying with my friend tomorrow. ⇨ He told me _____.
5. We are going to clean the house today. ⇨ He said _____.
6. Bern is the capital of Switzerland. ⇨ He told me _____.
7. I was playing golf yesterday. ⇨ He said _____.
8. John went to a party last night. ⇨ He says _____.

Question: In which of the above sentences is the backshift optional?

Reporting Questions

The same rules apply to reporting questions as for statements, but we also need to make additional changes. The most common reporting verb for questions is ***ask***. Look at the structures which follow ***ask*** below.

'Ask' can be followed with...

a) **(object) + indirect question:** *She asked (me) where I lived.*

b) **object + infinitive:** *She asked me to call her later.*

The object pronoun is optional with indirect questions.

- *She asked me where I lived.* ✓
- *She asked where I lived.* ✓

There are two types of questions we need to consider when reporting questions.

1. Yes / No Questions:

We introduce reported YES/NO questions with ***ask + if*** or ***whether***. Study the examples below:

Do you play tennis here? ⇨ *He asked (me) if/whether I played tennis there.*

Are you hungry? ⇨ *She asked (me) if/whether I was hungry.*

2. Questions with Question Words:

We introduce reported question-word questions with ***ask + question word/s.*** Study the examples below:

Where do you live? ⇨ *He asked (me) where I lived.*

What time are you leaving? ⇨ *She asked (me) what time I was leaving.*

What? Why? Where? Who? When? How?

Avoid these common errors!

Don't forget that a reported (indirect) question is not a real question; it is simply a report of what was said. The word order is the same as a normal statement (subject + verb + object).

Don't use the auxiliary ***do*** in reported questions in the Present Simple and Past Simple and there's no question mark.

- *He asked me if I **played** tennis.* ✓
- *She asked me if I **was** hungry.* ✓
- *He asked where I **lived**.* ✓
- *She asked me when **I was** leaving.* ✓

- *He asked me if I **did play** tennis.* ✗
- *She asked me if **was** I hungry.* ✗
- *He asked me where I **did live**.* ✗
- *She asked me when **was I** leaving.* ✗

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'Ask' + Infinitive for Requests:

We can use ***ask + object + infinitive*** to report requests. In these cases, the object is not optional.

Will you open the window? ⇨ *She asked me to open the window.*

Can you make me a cup of tea? ⇨ *He asked me to make him a cup of tea.*

Ex 7: Change these questions into reported speech. Use the backshift and start 'She asked me...'

1. Where do you live? ⇨ She asked (me) where I lived.
2. Have you ever been to France? ⇨ _____.
3. Who do you play chess with? ⇨ _____.
4. Did you call your mother? ⇨ _____.
5. How long are you staying here for? ⇨ _____.
6. Will you lend me €50? ⇨ _____.
7. Can you speak Japanese? ⇨ _____.
8. Are they going to buy a new car? ⇨ _____.

Reporting Orders & Instructions

The most common reporting verb for orders & instructions is ***tell***. We don't usually use ***say*** in these cases. We follow ***tell*** with an **indirect object + infinitive**. The imperative becomes the infinitive. To make the negative form we simply put ***not*** before the infinitive. Study the examples below:

Close the door. ⇨ *He told me to close the door.*

Wash your hands. ⇨ *My mother told me to wash my hands.*

Don't touch that cake! ⇨ *He told me **not** to touch the cake.*

Ex 8: Change these orders and instructions into reported speech. Start with 'He told me...'

1. Open the window. ⇨ He told me to open the window.
2. Don't be late! ⇨ _____.
3. Turn the television down. ⇨ _____.
4. Don't forget to call your mum. ⇨ _____.
5. Bake it in the oven for one hour. ⇨ _____.

Ex 9: Ask and answer the revision questions below in pairs or small groups.

1. What changes might we have to make when we report a statement?
2. What are the differences in meaning between ***say, tell*** and ***ask***?
3. What structures follow ***say*** and what structures follow ***tell***?
4. Can you remember the backshifts for each tense/structure?
5. What are the exceptions to backshift changes?
6. How do we report YES/NO questions and question-word questions?
7. How do we report orders and instructions in the positive and negative?

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