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Reported speech

Reported speech tells what someone said without using their exact words. Usually the tense moves one step back (am becomes was, will becomes would), pronouns and time words change, and questions use statement order: She asked where I lived. Use tell with a person and say without one.

What to know

Direct speech and reported speech

In **direct speech** you repeat the exact words, with quotation marks: She said, I am studying law. In **reported speech** you tell the idea from your own point of view, with no quotation marks: She said that she was studying law.

- *He said, I live in Leeds.* · direct
- *He said that he lived in Leeds.* · reported

Tense changes (backshift)

When the reporting verb is in the past (said, told, asked), the tense usually moves one step back in time. This is called **backshift**. Here are the changes you meet most often:

- present simple becomes past simple: I work becomes she worked.
- present continuous becomes past continuous: I am working becomes she was working.
- past simple becomes past perfect: I worked becomes she had worked.
- present perfect becomes past perfect: I have worked becomes she had worked.
- will becomes would, can becomes could, may becomes might, must becomes had to.

When you do not need backshift

If the reporting verb is in the present (she says, the report says) or if the statement is still true, the tense can stay the same: The report says that sea levels are rising. Many learners keep the original tense for general facts: My teacher told me that water boils at one hundred degrees.

Pronouns, time words and place words

Pronouns change to fit the new speaker: He said, I like my job becomes He said that he liked his job. Time and place words also change when the time or place of reporting is different:

- now becomes then; today becomes that day; tomorrow becomes the next day.
- yesterday becomes the day before; last week becomes the week before.
- here becomes there; this becomes that.

Say and tell

Tell is always followed by a person: She told me that the exam was easy. **Say** is not followed directly by a person: She said that the exam was easy. If you want to add a person after say, use to: She said to me that the exam was easy.

Exercises

1. Last year she told me she _____ to study law, but later she changed her mind.
 - a. wants
 - b. wanted
 - c. has wanted
2. The teacher asked us where we _____.
 - a. lived
 - b. did we live
 - c. to live
3. He told me _____ late.
 - a. that not be
 - b. not to be
 - c. don't be
4. She _____ me that the report was ready.
 - a. said
 - b. spoke
 - c. told
5. Ana said she _____ call me the next day.
 - a. does
 - b. will
 - c. would
6. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) She said me (2) that the (3) meeting was (4) cancelled.
7. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): asked / studied. / She / where / me / had / did / I
8. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): submit / essay / the / us / Friday. / told / on / that / He / to
9. Correct this: *At the interview, she asked me where did I live then.*
10. Correct this: *He said me that he was busy.*

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/reported-speech/practice/

IELTS tip. In Speaking Part 2, a short piece of reported speech makes a story vivid: My manager told me that I would get the job. In Writing, use reporting verbs like claim, suggest and argue to show other people's views instead of repeating the word said.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Reported speech

AIM	Learners report statements, questions and commands with accurate backshift, word order and reporting verbs.
TIME	30 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Whisper a short sentence to one learner, who passes it on to a partner. The partner reports what was said to the class using He said...

Lesson steps

1. Show direct and reported versions of the same sentence and elicit the changes in tense, pronoun and time word.
2. Drill backshift with a quick table: learners give the reported form for ten prompts.
3. Contrast say and tell with a gap-fill and a short mingle.
4. Teach reported questions with a mock interview: one learner asks, a partner reports to a third.
5. Learners write a short account of a conversation they had recently, using at least five reported structures.

Extension

Learners read a short newspaper-style text and rewrite three quotations as reported speech using claim, suggest and warn.

Answer key

1. b) wanted. After a past reporting verb the tense moves back: wants becomes wanted.
2. a) lived. Reported questions use statement order with no do, and the tense moves back.
3. b) not to be. A negative command is reported with not to + base verb.
4. c) told. Tell is followed directly by a person. Said me is not correct.
5. c) would. Will becomes would in reported speech after a past reporting verb.
6. Part 1: *She said me* → **She told me**. Say is not followed directly by a person. Use told me.
7. She asked me where I had studied. A reported question uses statement order, and the past simple moves back to the past perfect.
8. He told us to submit the essay on Friday. Told + person + to + base verb reports a command.

9. At the interview, she asked me where I lived then. A reported question uses statement word order, with no did, and then forces the past tense: lived.
10. He told me that he was busy. Say does not take a person directly. Use told me, or remove me.

Questions learners often ask

What is reported speech? It is a way to tell what someone said without using their exact words. The tenses, pronouns and time words usually change.

Do I always have to change the tense? Not always. You can keep the tense when the reporting verb is in the present or when the statement is still true. Changing the tense after a past reporting verb is always correct.

What is the difference between say and tell? Tell is followed by a person (told me). Say is not (said that). Use say to + person if you need to name the listener.

How do I report a question? Use statement word order with no do or question mark: She asked where I lived. Use if or whether for yes/no questions.

Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage, 4th edition. Oxford University Press.
- Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (2006). Cambridge Grammar of English. Cambridge University Press.

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