

Indirect speech

Indirect speech and the sequence of tenses

We use indirect speech/ reported speech when we are telling someone what another person says or said. The reporting verb (*say, tell*) might be in the present or past and the tenses of the reported statement are often (but not always) affected by this.

Compare:

- Actual spoken statement: *I can see him now*
- Direct statement in writing: *'I can see him now,' the boss says/said*
- Indirect statement (present): *The boss **says** (that) he **can see** you now**
- Indirect statement (past): *The boss **said** (that) he **could see** you now**

Basic uses of 'say', 'tell' and 'ask'

- **tell** + a personal indirect object : *You haven't got much time, he told me.*
- **Say** + optional to+ a personal indirect object :
You haven't got much time, he said (to me).
- **Ask** can be followed by an indirect object: '
Are you comfortable?' he asked (me)/He asked (me) if I was comfortable

Indirect Statements: reporting verb in the present

If the **reporting verb** in indirect speech is **in the present**, the tenses that follow are **usually the same**. This is often the case when we report words that have just been spoken

I've read Tony's book and I don't understand it and doesn't understand it → *Jim says tells me (that) he's read Tony's book*

I've read Tony's book and I didn't understand it and didn't understand it → *Jim says tells me (that) he's read Tony's book*

The reporting verb is often in the present in contexts like the following:

- reporting a rumour :
A *A little birdie tells me you're applying for a new job*
B *Who tells you?*
A *Never you mind!*
- passing on messages:
A *Come in now Jim. Dinner is ready*
B *What does your mother say?*
C *She says you must come in now, dad. (She says) Dinner is ready*
- reading a newspaper or a letter and reporting:
A *What does the article say?*
B *The writer says we'll have robots which can understand*
- reporting something someone says very often:

Mary's always talking about money She's always complaining that things are expensive and she's always asking how much I've paid for one thing and another...

Indirect speech with tense changes

'Rules'

Tense changes often occur in indirect speech because there is an interval between the original spoken words and the time when they are reported, but these changes are not always obligatory. It is the viewpoint of the reporting speaker or writer that decides the choice of appropriate forms, not complicated rules.

Reporting verbs

We use reporting verbs, such as: *he continued, he added that, he observed, noted, remarked, etc.* to remind the reader that the language is reported. Many features present in direct speech, such as *Yes/No short answers and speech 'fillers' such as , Well, etc., disappear* in indirect speech.

Tense changes

In indirect speech we do not usually repeat the speaker's exact words. Reporting usually takes place in the past, so the reporting verb is often in the past. As a result, the tenses of the reported clause are usually 'moved back'. This 'moving back' of tenses is called backshift. A useful general rule is:

- present becomes past
- past and present perfect become past perfect
- past modals and the past perfect are unchanged

Pronoun changes

Pronouns change (or not) depending on the view of the reporter:

*Ana: 'I'll send you a card Sue ' Ann told Sue **she** 'd send **her** a card (reported by someone else)
Ann said/told me **she** would send me a card (reported by Sue)
| told Sue (that) I 'd send her a card (reported by Ann)*

Time and place changes

For example, on Tuesday, Tom says:

'A card came yesterday saying Sue will arrive tomorrow '

John, reporting this *on* Wednesday, might say:

Tom told me a card had come the day before yesterday/on Monday saying Sue would arrive today/on Wednesday

But time and place changes are not always necessary. If, for example, it was still Tuesday when the statement above was reported, John might say: *Tom told me a card came (or had come) yesterday saying Sue will (or would) arrive tomorrow*

Modal verbs

'Modal present' becomes 'modal past': e.g. *can* becomes *could*; *will* becomes *would*; *may* becomes *might*:

*I **can/will/may** see you later,' he said
He said he **could/would/might** see me later*

would, could, might, ought to, used to remain unchanged in indirect speech.

Indirect Yes/No questions

He asked (me) +if/whether + s +verb +...

- be:** 'Are you ready?' He asked (me) if/whether I am/was ready
have: 'Have you finished?' He asked (me) if/whether I (have)/had finished
Do: 'Do you play chess?' He asked (me) if/whether I play/played chess
modals: 'Can I have it?' He asked (me) if/whether he can/could have it

Notes on the form of indirect Yes/No questions

Word order: **The inversion in the direct question changes back to statement word order** (subject + verb) in the reported question and, if necessary, the tense is changed at the same time. Modals may change from their 'present' form to their 'past' form]:

direct statement: *He is ready* ' (subject + verb)

direct Yes/No question: *Is he ready?*' (inversion)

indirect question: *She asked me if he was ready* (if + subject + verb)

Reporting Yes/No questions

All kinds of Yes/No questions are reported in the same way:

'Don't you play chess?' / 'You don't play chess, do you?' / 'You play chess, don't you?' etc.



He asked me if/whether I played chess.

If or *whether* must always be used when reporting Yes/No questions and cannot be omitted:

Tom asked if/whether it was raining

Whether is usually preferred when there are alternatives:

She asked me whether I wanted tea or coffee

If and *whether* are interchangeable after *ask*, *want to know*, *wonder* etc., but *whether* conveys slightly greater doubt.

Indirect question–word questions

<i>be</i>	<i>Where are you going?</i>	<i>He asked (me) where I was going</i>
<i>have.</i>	<i>'Why haven't you finished?</i>	<i>He wanted to know why I (haven't)/hadn't finished</i>
<i>do.</i>	<i>'What do you think of it?'</i>	<i>He wanted to know what I (think/thought of it</i>
<i>modals</i>	<i>'When must I be there?'</i>	<i>He asked (me) when he must be/had to be there</i>

Word order: *be*, *have* and modal auxiliaries

The inversion after a question–word in a direct question changes back to statement word order (subject + verb) in the reported question and, if necessary, the tense is changed at the same time.

direct statement: *We are going home* **direct Wh–question:** *Where are you going?* (*Wh–* + inversion)

indirect question: *He asked (us) where we were going* (*Wh–* + subject + verb)

Word order: *do*, *does* and *did*: *Do/does/did* in direct questions disappear in reported questions:

direct statement:	<i>I gave it to John.</i>
direct Wh–question:	<i>'When did you give it to John?'</i>
indirect question:	<i>He asked me when I gave it to John</i>

Indirect question–word questions with verbs other than *ask*:

Many different **reporting verbs** can be used other than *ask*, *want to know*, etc.:

I ***know*** *where he lives*, ***She didn't say*** *why she was coming home late*, ***He didn't tell me*** *how he did it*

Indirect subject-questions

- be:** *'Who is in charge here?'* *He asked (me) who was in charge there*
- present:** *'Which firm makes these parts?'* *He asked (me) which firm made those parts*
- past:** *'What caused the accident?'* *He asked (me) had caused the accident*
- modals.** *'Whose novel will win the prize?'* *He asked (me) whose novel would win the prize.*

Note on the form of indirect subject-questions

Tense changes and **changes in modals** occur in the **usual way**, but the **word order** of the direct question is **retained** in the indirect question.

Reporting verbs other than *ask* can be used to introduce indirect subject questions

Please tell me who delivered this package
I want to know which piece fits in this puzzle

Uses of the to–infinitive in indirect speech

actual spoken words

'Keep a record of your expenses'
'Don't make a mess in the kitchen'
'How do I prepare the sauce?'
I want to speak to the manager

reported version

I told him to keep a record of his expenses
I told him not to make a mess in the kitchen
He wanted to know how to prepare the sauce
She asked to speak to the manager

The imperative: affirmative and negative

Imperatives (usually orders, requests, advice, etc.) are reported with appropriate verbs followed by a to–infinitive. Commonly–used verbs (always followed by a personal object in indirect speech) are: *advise, ask, instruct, remind, tell, warn*, etc. In each case the reporting verb must match the function of the imperative (asking, telling, advising, etc.) [

'Keep a record of your expenses' I said **tell:** *I told him to keep a record of his expenses*
Remember to switch off all the lights ' she said **remind:** *She reminded me to switch off all the lights*

When a **negative imperative** (e.g. *Don't make a mess!*) is reported, **not** always goes **before the to–infinitive**: *She told 'asked'/warned him **not to make a mess in the kitchen***

Ask: when a speaker is asking permission or making a request, ask may be followed by the infinitive: *I asked to speak to the manager*

The infinitive after question–words: Direct suggestions and requests for advice and information with *Shall I...? Should I ...?, Do you want me to...?* etc. (expecting Yes/No answers) can be reported in two ways:

direct request: *Shall/Should I phone her?'* **indirect request:** *He wanted to know if/whether he should phone her*

whether + infinitive: *He wanted to know whether to phone her*

Requests, etc. with question–words can also be reported in two ways:

direct request: *How shall I prepare the sauce?'*
indirect request: *He wanted to know how he should prepare it*

question–word + infinitive: *He wanted to know how to prepare it*