

Reported speech

CEFR B1-B2 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

Direct to indirect: one step back, pronouns move, time words change, say vs tell.

The rule

Direct and reported speech

- Direct: "The train is late," she said. The words sit inside quotation marks.
- Reported: She said that the train was late. No quotation marks, and the verb usually moves back.
- "That" is optional after say and tell, but it makes a long sentence easier to read.
- Report with say and tell: "He said he was busy", "He told me he was busy".

The tense backshift

- Present simple becomes past simple: "I work here" becomes she said she worked there.
- Present continuous becomes past continuous: "I am reading" becomes he said he was reading.
- Past simple becomes past perfect: "I saw the film" becomes she said she had seen the film.
- Will becomes would; can becomes could; may becomes might; must becomes had to.
- Present perfect becomes past perfect: "I have finished" becomes he said he had finished.

Pronouns and possessives move

- Pronouns follow the speaker, not the original words: "I am busy" said Tom becomes Tom said he was busy.
- "My phone is broken" becomes she said her phone was broken.
- "We are late" becomes they said they were late.
- When you report your own words, the pronoun stays: I said I was busy.

Time and place words move

- now becomes then; today becomes that day; tonight becomes that night.
- yesterday becomes the day before; tomorrow becomes the next day or the following day.
- last week becomes the week before; next week becomes the following week.
- here becomes there; this becomes that; these becomes those.
- In a story told on the same day, the words often stay: "She said she will come today."

No backshift, questions and commands

- Keep the tense when the fact is still true: "She said she lives in Rome" (and she still lives there).
- Keep the tense for a recent statement, a habit or a general truth: "He said the earth is round."
- Yes or no questions take if or whether: "Are you ready?" becomes he asked if I was ready.
- Wh-questions keep the question word but use statement order: "Where do you live?" becomes she asked

where I lived.

- Commands take tell plus to: "Close the door" becomes he told me to close the door.

Questions

Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. "I am busy," Anna said. Anna said she ___ busy.

2. "I have seen this film," Tom said. Tom said he ___ that film.

3. "We will help you," they said. They said they ___ me.

4. "Where do you work?" she asked. She asked me where I ___.

5. He ___ me that the meeting was cancelled.

6. "Can you swim?" he asked. He asked if I ___ swim.

7. "I bought a new car yesterday," she said. She said she had bought a new car ___.

8. "Close the window, please," she said. She ___ me to close the window.

9. "I am living in Berlin now," he said. He said he ___ in Berlin ___.

10. "Do you know the answer?" the teacher asked. The teacher asked ___ I knew the answer.

11. "I may be late," she said. She said she ___ be late.

12. "You must finish today," the coach said. The coach said we ___ finish that day.

13. My father said that he ___ tired after work.

14. "This is my sister," he said. He said that ___ was his sister.

15. She asked me ___ the door was open.

16. "I cannot come tonight," Maria said. Maria said she ___ come ___.

17. "The sun rises in the east," the teacher said. The teacher said the sun ___ in the east.

18. "Why are you crying?" he asked. He asked why I ___ .

19. She told me ___ worry about the test.

20. "I will see you here tomorrow," he said. He said he would see me ___ ___.

Answer key

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1. **was** — Present simple moves back to past simple when the reporting verb is in the past: she was busy.
2. **had seen** — Present perfect moves back to past perfect: he had seen.
3. **would help** — Will moves back to would in reported speech.
4. **worked** — Reported questions use statement order and move the tense back: where I worked.
5. **told** — Tell takes the listener directly: told me. Say cannot take "me" without "to".
6. **could** — Can moves back to could.
7. **the day before** — Yesterday becomes the day before when the reporting happens later.
8. **told** — Commands use tell plus the person plus to: told me to close.
9. **was living ... then** — Present continuous becomes past continuous, and now becomes then.
10. **if** — A yes or no question takes if or whether in reported speech.
11. **might** — May moves back to might.
12. **had to** — Must usually moves back to had to when the obligation was in the past.
13. **was** — When the reporting verb is in the past, present simple becomes past simple.
14. **that** — This changes to that in reported speech, and my changes to his.
15. **if** — The original question was "Is the door open?" A yes or no question becomes if or whether.
16. **could not ... that night** — Cannot moves back to could not, and tonight becomes that night.
17. **rises** — A general truth keeps its original tense: the sun rises.
18. **was crying** — Present continuous becomes past continuous, and the word order is statement order: why I was crying.
19. **not to** — Negative commands in reported speech use tell plus not to plus the verb.
20. **there ... the next day** — Here becomes there, and tomorrow becomes the next day or the following day.