

REPORTED SPEECH

We very often have to report what someone says, and we rarely have to report it at exactly the moment when they say it, so it's natural for us to put what they say into our past and to move all the verb tenses *back by one*. This is called 'backshift', a term which you'll see in the grammar notes below.

Backshift has certain rules, but these shouldn't be exaggerated. It's as acceptable – at least when we're speaking and not doing a grammar exercise – to say: '*She said she enjoys going out*' as it is to say '*She said she enjoyed going out*'.

In addition to backshift, there are other points connected with reported speech which cause frequent problems: the difference between 'say' and 'tell', and reported questions and their word order.

BASIC REPORTING VERBS – 'SAY' AND 'TELL'

As a simple rule, 'to say something' contrasts with 'to tell someone something':

She said she was angry.

She told me she was angry.

'Say' is frequently followed by:

- a noun or pronoun

He said goodbye.

The rest of them didn't say anything.

- a noun clause

They said what time we should arrive.

- a clause with or without 'that'

John says (that) he'll come over at about 8.00.

It is not possible to use 'tell' in the sentences above.

'Tell' is frequently followed by:

- two objects

Sarah told her parents the whole story.

- an object and infinitive structure

I told him to go home.

- an object and noun clause

They told us where they'd been.

- An object and clause with or without 'that'

The company told the workers (that) they'd be paid as usual.

It is not possible to use 'say' in the sentences above.

REPORTED SPEECH – BACKSHIFT

'Backshift' means that we usually go one tense back to report what someone said, because of the time difference between their saying it and our reporting it. '*I've just had a good piece of news*' becomes '*She said she'd just had a good piece of news*', *present simple becomes simple past*, *present continuous becomes past continuous etc.*

Some common changes:

I have finished the book already → *She said she had finished the book already.*
I knew the truth from the beginning → *He said he had known the truth from the beginning.*
I will phone you next week → *She said she would phone me next week.*

REPORTED QUESTIONS

The word order after the question word(s) in reported questions is the same as in affirmative sentences:

~~*She asked me what was I doing it for?*~~ *She asked me what I was doing it for.*
~~*He wanted to know what time was it.*~~ *He wanted to know what time it was.*

(Note that you do not use a question mark if you write a reported question.)

'If' and 'whether' mean the same, and are used to report questions to which the answer is 'yes' or 'no':
Are you ready yet? → *I asked them if/whether they were ready yet.*

MORE REPORTING VERBS

verbs with alternative structures:

He admitted not being prepared/that he had not been prepared for an emergency.
I denied knowing /that I knew anything about it.
He mentioned having been/that he had been in the police force.
My brother recommended avoiding/that we should avoid the main roads.
Diane suggested having/that we should have an early lunch.

verbs with a 'that' clause:

She agreed that we'd been careless with the money.
Mike complained that we hadn't kept him informed.
Our tour guide explained that we would have the afternoon free.
He insisted that there really was no problem.
I pointed out that there was another way to do things.

verbs with an object and a 'that' clause:

I reminded her that she'd need to wear something warm.
Denis warned me that his cousin was extremely boring.

Exercise 1

Choose either 'say' or 'tell' to complete the sentences below.

1. How do you 'keyboard' in French?

- a) say
- b) tell

2. She she was coming back in a minute.

- a) said
- b) told

3. Can you guess what he to me?

- a) said
- b) told

4. I can't possibly guess what he you.
a) said
b) told
5. Excuse me! Can you me the way to the station?
a) say
b) tell
6. Nick is such a joker! You never know when he's the truth.
a) saying
b) telling
7. The doctor me to get more sleep and exercise.
a) said
b) told
8. I have something to about your idea.
a) say
b) tell
9. Let me you what I think.
a) say
b) tell
10. I her I liked her idea.
a) said
b) told

Exercise 2

A politician made some statements. Report what he said, using backshift. (See the grammar.)

1. "The minister is incompetent."
He said the minister incompetent.
2. "Foreign investment is falling."
He claimed that foreign investment
3. "We will not see an economic recovery in the near future."
He said we an economic recovery in the near future.
4. "Businesses have told me that they will invest elsewhere."
He said businesses that they invest elsewhere.
5. "The government is afraid of an election."
He accused the government of of an election.
6. "The government's strategy is less coherent than mine."
He stated that the government's strategy
7. "Most people agree with me."
He said most people

8. "Of course, I don't dislike the minister personally."

He explained that he the minister personally.

9. "But history will prove I am right."

He asserted that history he right.

10. "People will appreciate what my party has contributed to the economic debate."

He said people appreciate what his party to the economic debate.

Exercise 3

Which verbs are the correct reporting verbs in the sentences below?

1. He the government irresponsible.

a) called

b) said

2. He that his party would do well in the election.

a) predicted

b) warned

3. He there to be a rise in unemployment.

a) expected

b) warned

4. People were constantly him how much they liked his policies, he said.

a) saying

b) telling

5. He some manufacturers that were worried about the future.

a) explained

b) cited

6. He the government was putting the country's future at risk.

a) accused

b) claimed

7. Difficult decisions would have to be made, he

a) conceded

b) advised

8. He a period of instability before a return to economic growth.

a) forecast

b) thought

9. He to meet the minister for exploratory talks.

a) recommended

b) offered

10. He trying to gain a political advantage from the situation.

a) denied

b) refused

Exercise 4

Complete these reported questions about a film director, using backshift.

1. "What does it mean to be an independent film-maker?"

We asked her what it to be an independent film-maker.

2. "How did you come up with the idea for the film?"

We asked her how she the idea for the film.

3. "How much did the project cost?"

We wanted to know how much the project

4. "Are you envious of the money available in Hollywood?"

We enquired whether envious of the money available in Hollywood.

5. "Could you tell us about the main character?"

We wanted her about the main character.

6. "How difficult was it to put the cast together?"

We questioned her about the difficulty of

7. "Don't you find it strange that your films contain so little dialogue?"

We wondered whether she find it strange that her films so little dialogue.

8. "What are you going to do now that the movie is completed?"

We wanted to know what she now that the movie

9. "What have people's first reactions to it been?"

We asked what

10. "Will we see it in movie theaters soon?"

We asked whether we see it in movie theaters soon.

a recovery – economic growth

elsewhere – somewhere else, in a different place

the cast – all the actors in a film, series, play etc.