

## A2 · TEENS · LESSON 18 · REPORTED SPEECH

*She **said** she **was** tired.*

When someone tells you something and later you want to share it with a third person, English makes you step the tenses back one level. "I am tired" becomes "He said he was tired." This is **reported speech** — the grammar of gossip, news, and everything you ever overheard.

**direct → reported**

The transformation

**step tense back 1**Present → Past · Past → Past  
Perfect**say vs tell**

Two reporting verbs

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**Warm-Up**

Overheard · reported · repeated

**What did they really say?**

You overhear a conversation. Later, a friend asks: "What did they say?" You don't repeat their words exactly — you *report* them, and English quietly shifts the tenses back. Look at each direct quote and try to report it using *said* or *told me*.

1. Ayla said: "*I am hungry.*" → Ayla said (that) she \_\_\_\_\_ hungry.
2. Marco said: "*I can't swim.*" → Marco said he \_\_\_\_\_ swim.
3. Naomi told me: "*I have finished my homework.*" → Naomi told me she \_\_\_\_\_ her homework.
4. The teacher said: "*You will have a test on Friday.*" → The teacher said we \_\_\_\_\_ a test on Friday.

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**Grammar Focus**

Reported Speech: tense backshift + say vs tell

Reported speech — also called *indirect speech* — is how we repeat what someone said **without using their exact words**. Direct quotes need quotation marks: *She said, "I am tired."* Reported speech doesn't: *She said (that) she **was** tired.*

The big trick is that English shifts the tense *one step into the past* when the reporting verb (*said, told, asked*) is itself in the past. Present Simple becomes Past Simple. Past Simple becomes Past Perfect. *Will* becomes *would*. *Can* becomes *could*. One rule — and it works every time.

#### THE TRANSFORMATION

Direct: **"I am tired."** → Reported: **She said she was tired.**

Remove the quotation marks. Shift the pronouns. Step the tense back one level. That's it.

**THE BACKSHIFT TABLE — TENSES GO ONE STEP BACK**

**Direct → Reported: every tense moves**

When the reporting verb is in the **past** (*said, told me, asked*), every tense in the quote shifts *one step back in time*. Learn this table once, and you have reported speech forever.

**PRESENT SIMPLE → PAST SIMPLE**

"I **work** here." → She said she **worked** there.

*am/is/are* becomes *was/were*. *Work* becomes *worked*.

**PAST SIMPLE → PAST PERFECT**

"I **saw** him." → She said she **had seen** him.

Past simple becomes *had + V3*. One more step back.

**WILL → WOULD**

"I **will help**." → He said he **would help**.

The most common modal change. Future becomes conditional.

**CAN → COULD / MUST → HAD TO**

"I **can swim**." → He said he **could swim**.

Modals follow the same one-step-back rule.

**Shortcut:** if the reporting verb is *present* (*she says, not said*), keep the original tense. Backshift only happens when the reporting verb is in the past.

**USE 1 · REPORTING STATEMENTS****said / told — the basic pattern**

For simple statements, use **said (that)** or **told + person (that)**. The word *that* is optional but common. Don't forget to shift pronouns and the tense.

"I live in Rome." → She said (that) she **lived** in Rome.

"We are happy." → They told me (that) they **were** happy.

"It has started." → He said it **had started**.

**USE 2 · REPORTING QUESTIONS****asked + if / wh-word**

Reported questions are special: the word order changes to statement order (no auxiliary inversion!). Yes/no questions use **if** or **whether**; wh-questions keep their *wh*-word.

"Do you live here?" → She asked **if I lived** there.

"What time is it?" → He asked **what time it was**.

"Where are you going?" → She asked **where I was** going.

**USE 3 · TIME & PLACE WORDS CHANGE TOO**

**now → then · today → that day · here → there**

When you report later or in a different place, some "here and now" words don't make sense any more. Shift them along with the tense for full accuracy.

"I am busy **now**." → She said she was busy **then**.

"I saw her **yesterday**." → He said he had seen her **the day before**.

"We arrive **tomorrow**." → They said they would arrive **the next day**.

△ THE CLASSIC A2 TRAP

**Say or tell? The pronoun decides**

Learners often mix up **say** and **tell**. The rule is simple: **tell** needs a person directly after it (*tell me, tell him, told Anna*). **Say** never has a person right after it (*she said that...*). Get this wrong and it sounds instantly off.

✗ WRONG

"She **said me** she was tired." (no person after say)

✓ RIGHT

"She **told me** she was tired." OR "She **said** she was tired."

✗ WRONG

"He **told that** he was late." (tell needs a person)

✓ RIGHT

"He **said that** he was late." OR "He **told us** that he was late."



**Key Vocabulary**

10 reporting verbs & expressions you need

**REPORTING VERB    NEEDS PERSON?    EXAMPLE IN REPORTED SPEECH**

<b>say (said)</b>	no	"She <b>said</b> (that) she was hungry."
<b>tell (told)</b>	yes	"He <b>told me</b> (that) he was late."
<b>ask</b>	often	"They <b>asked</b> me if I knew the answer."
<b>promise</b>	optional	"She <b>promised</b> (me) that she would help."
<b>admit</b>	no	"He <b>admitted</b> (that) he had lied."
<b>explain</b>	optional	"She <b>explained</b> (that) the bus was cancelled."
<b>reply</b>	no	"Tom <b>replied</b> (that) he would think about it."
<b>complain</b>	no	"They <b>complained</b> (that) the food was cold."
<b>mention</b>	no	"She <b>mentioned</b> (that) her brother had moved."
<b>wonder</b>	no (use if)	"I <b>wondered</b> if she would come back."

## IV

## Reading

Four stories, four ways to repeat what was said

THE WHAT THEY SAID ISSUE · VOLUME 18

## Secrets, arguments, confessions & rumours

*An overheard phone call in Seoul, a classroom row in Marrakech, a late confession in Prague, and a breaking news story in Caracas. Four teenagers, four times someone said something — and someone else repeated it.*

### STORY ONE · THE OVERHEARD PHONE CALL

#### Jisoo, 15 · Seoul

Jisoo's older sister Hyewon has been dating Minsu for two years. One evening, Jisoo walks past her sister's bedroom and stops. Hyewon is on the phone — and her voice is shaking.

Later, Jisoo tells their mother what she heard. "Hyewon **said** she **was** tired. She **said** Minsu **had forgotten** their anniversary again. She **told him** she **wasn't** angry, just sad. Then Minsu **said** he **was sorry** and that he **would make it up** to her somehow."

Her mother listens carefully. "And what did Hyewon **say** next?" "She **said** maybe they **needed** a break. She **told him** she **would call** him tomorrow." Jisoo pauses. "Then she didn't say anything for a long time. I think she was crying."

Her mother puts down her tea. In that one conversation, Jisoo used reported speech in nearly every sentence — without ever thinking about it. That's how natural it becomes, once the backshift rule is a habit.

**REPORTING STATEMENTS · SAID / TOLD HIM** Notice the backshift: "I am tired" → she **was** tired; "he has forgotten" → he **had forgotten**; "I will make it up" → he **would make it up**. Jisoo uses both *said* (no person) and *told him* (with person).

### STORY TWO · A ROW IN HISTORY CLASS

## Yassine, 16 · Marrakech

Monday morning, Yassine's history teacher, Madame El Fassi, is not in a good mood. Yassine is late, his homework is missing, and he has the wrong textbook. That evening, he tells his father what happened.

"She **asked me** *where* I **had been**. I **said** the bus **had been late**. She **asked me** *why* I **hadn't finished** the essay. I **told her** I **had finished** it but I **had left** it at home. Then she **asked if** I **was telling** the truth. I **said** I **was**."

His father smiles slightly. "And were you?" Yassine sighs. "Mostly. I **had** started it. But I hadn't finished it. I **told** Madame El Fassi I **would bring** it tomorrow. I **promised** her I **would**."

"Then tonight, you'd better finish it," his father replies. "Because your promise was in reported speech. And reported promises still have to be kept."

**REPORTING QUESTIONS · ASKED IF / WHY** Yassine's story shows how reported questions work: "Where have you been?" → she asked *where* I **had been**; "Are you telling the truth?" → she asked *if* I **was telling** the truth. No question mark, no auxiliary inversion.

### STORY THREE · A CONFESSION AFTER THREE YEARS

## Tereza, 17 · Prague

When Tereza was fourteen, her glass owl — a gift from her late grandmother — disappeared from the living room shelf. She cried for a week. Her parents said a cat must have knocked it off. No one ever found the pieces.

Three years later, on her seventeenth birthday, her younger brother Jakub sits down next to her. "I need to tell you something," he says. "Remember the owl?" Tereza nods slowly. Jakub takes a breath. "I was playing with a football in the house. I hit the shelf. The owl fell. I **told** everyone I **hadn't seen** anything. But I **had broken** it. I was twelve and I was scared you would never forgive me."

Tereza doesn't speak for a while. Then she says: "So for three years, you **said** you **didn't know**. You **told** Mum and Dad it **wasn't** you. And every time I cried, you **said** nothing."

Jakub looks at the floor. "I'm sorry. I **should have told** you then." Tereza hugs him. "The owl is gone," she says quietly. "But the truth is here now. That's what matters."

**REPORTING LIES & TRUTHS · PAST → PAST PERFECT** When reporting what someone said a long time ago, past simple in the original quote shifts to *had* + V3. "I didn't see anything" → he **had not seen** anything; "I broke it" → he **had broken** it.

### STORY FOUR · THE SIX O'CLOCK NEWS

## Luisa, 15 · Caracas



A *have I* B *if I have* C *if I had*

VI

## Speaking

Report conversations you've had or heard

### What did they say? What did you say back?

ANSWER EACH PROMPT USING REPORTED SPEECH — SAID, TOLD ME, ASKED...

Take turns with a partner. Give full reported-speech answers — remember to shift the tense back one step, and to choose **said** (no person) or **told/asked + person**.

1. What did a family member tell you this morning? (Try: "She told me that..." / "He said he would...")
2. What was the last question a teacher asked you? (Try: "She asked me if..." / "He asked me where...")
3. Tell me about the last piece of news you heard. (Try: "The presenter said that...")
4. What did someone promise you recently? (Try: "My friend promised that...")
5. What was the best advice someone ever gave you? (Try: "She told me I should...")

#### MODEL DIALOGUE — REPORTING A FAMILY CONVERSATION

**A:** "What did your mum say about the weekend?"

**B:** "She *told me* (that) I *had to* clean my room before Saturday. She also *said* she *would take* us to the beach if the weather was good."

**A:** "And what did you say back?"

**B:** "I *told her* (that) I *had already cleaned* it. And I *asked* her *what time* we *would leave*."

**A:** "Did she answer?"

**B:** "She *said* she *didn't know* yet. She *said* it *depended* on my brother."

VI

## Writing

A reported conversation (80-120 words)



**Test your reported speech — Quick Check**

Choose the best answer. 8 questions.

**Q1 OF 8 · PRESENT → PAST BACKSHIFT****Aylin said: "I *am* busy." → Aylin said (that) she \_\_\_\_ busy.**

- A is
- B was
- C has been
- D will be

**Q2 OF 8 · PAST → PAST PERFECT****He said: "I *saw* the film." → He said he \_\_\_\_ the film.**

- A saw
- B has seen
- C had seen
- D would see

**Q3 OF 8 · WILL → WOULD****Rosa said: "I *will help* you." → Rosa said she \_\_\_\_ me.**

- A will help
- B helps
- C would help
- D had helped

**Q4 OF 8 · SAY VS TELL****Which sentence is *incorrect*?**

- A He said that he was tired.
- B She told me that she was tired.
- C They asked if we were coming.
- D She said me that she was tired.

**Q5 OF 8 · REPORTED YES/NO QUESTION****"Do you like coffee?" → She asked me \_\_\_\_ coffee.**

- A do I like
- B if I liked
- C if do I like
- D that I like

**Q6 OF 8 · REPORTED WH-QUESTION****"Where do you live?" → He asked me \_\_\_\_.**

- A where do I live
- B where did I live
- C where I lived
- D where I do live

**Q7 OF 8 · READING RECALL****In Story Three, what did Jakub finally tell Tereza?**

- A That a cat had knocked the owl off the shelf.
- B That he had broken the owl himself with a football.
- C That their grandmother had taken it back.
- D That he had given it to a friend.

**Q8 OF 8 · CAN → COULD****Nour said: "I *can't swim*." → Nour said she \_\_\_\_.**

- A couldn't swim
- B can't swim
- C wouldn't swim
- D hadn't swum

## Answer Key

### PRACTICE (PART VI)

1. B 2. C 3. C 4. B 5. A 6. B 7. C 8. C

### QUIZ (PART IX)

Q1. B Q2. C Q3. C Q4. D Q5. B Q6. C Q7. B Q8. A