
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Grammar

Reported speech



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Catherine

Hello. Welcome to 6 Minute Grammar with me, Catherine.

Neil

And me, Neil.

Catherine

Neil, have a sandwich. It's from Finn. He said you were hungry.

Neil

Really?

Catherine

Yes! He said... In fact, Finn said: "He's hungry. Give him a sandwich."

Neil

Wow! That's very kind of Finn. It's delicious.

Catherine

And in today's programme we're talking about reported speech.

Neil

We'll be discussing why and when we use it. And we'll see how to form it...

Catherine

We use reported speech when we want to report something that another person said. In our example, Finn originally said:

Finn

He's hungry.

Neil

That's direct speech. Catherine reported the direct speech, like this:

Catherine

Finn said you were hungry.

Neil

Let's look at that more closely. We need to make some grammatical changes when we report what someone else says. First, when the speaker or listener changes, we need to change the pronouns.

Catherine

That's right. Finn used **he** in direct speech to talk about Neil:

Finn

He is hungry.

Neil

Then Catherine told me what Finn said.

Catherine

Finn said **you** were hungry.

Neil

Second change: In reported speech we often move the tense back one step into the past. So **is hungry** becomes **were hungry**. **Was hungry** becomes **had been hungry**, and so on.

Catherine

But we don't have to change the verb tense in reported speech if the situation is generally true. Here's an example. Finn, give us a sentence please:

Finn

OK. I **love** cheese sandwiches.

Catherine

Thank you, Finn. And Neil, can you report what Finn said, please?

Neil

Yes. Finn said he **loves** cheese sandwiches.

Catherine

OK. So there we don't change **loves** to **loved**, because Finn loves cheese sandwiches and that's a general truth.

Neil

Now the third thing we need with reported speech is a reporting verb. **Say** and **tell** are the most common ones. And we usually put them in the past tense. For example: Finn **said** Neil was hungry.

Catherine

Now let's look at how to report questions with question words like **What** and **Who**.

Neil

We'll hear the direct speech first from Finn, then Catherine will give us the reported speech.

Finn

What's the time?

Catherine

Finn asked what the time was.

Neil

The reporting verb comes first, then the question word, and then the reported sentence with the tense moved back. And don't forget to change the word order from question word order to statement word order. Another one please Finn and Catherine?

Finn

Who ate the cake?

Catherine

He asked who'd eaten the cake.

Neil

OK, now it's time to look at pronunciation.

Catherine

Yes, pronunciation. Some past tense forms in reported speech can be difficult to hear. In the last example, the two words **who** and **had** become who'd. He asked who'd eaten the cake.

Neil

So **had** is shortened to just a /d/ sound. Listen out for the short /d/ sound in this next example:

Finn

She asked where I'd gone.

Neil

So, the phrase **I had** becomes **I'd**. One more time please Finn:

Finn

She asked where I'd gone.

Catherine

Thank you, Finn. So watch out for contractions in reported speech.

Neil

And now are you ready?

Catherine

For a quiz?

Neil

It's quiz time! Finn is going to say some sentences in direct speech. As you listen, decide what the correct reported speech is. Here's the first one.

Finn

I've eaten my lunch.

Neil

Is the reported speech a) He said he's eating his lunch or b) He said he'd eaten his lunch?

Catherine

And the answer is b) He said he'd eaten his lunch. The present perfect changes to the past perfect.

Neil

OK. Next one please Finn:

Finn

I go to work by bus.

Neil

Is the reported speech a) Finn said he goes to work by bus or b) Finn said he's going to work by bus?

Catherine

And it's a) Finn said he goes to work by bus.

Neil

OK. And here's the last one:

Finn

Where are my glasses?

Neil

Is it a) He asked where were his glasses or b) He asked where his glasses were?

Catherine

And the right answer is b) He asked where his glasses were.

Neil

Now, before we go, there's just enough time for a top tip. With the reporting verb **tell** we say who the person is talking to, for example, Finn **told me** he's going to pay for lunch today.

Catherine

Wow! And when we use the reporting verb **say** we don't say who the person is talking to. So this next sentence is wrong:

Neil

Finn **said me** he was going to pay for lunch today.

Catherine

Yes, that's wrong but this one is correct:

Neil

Finn **said** he was going to pay for lunch today.

Catherine

So that's reported speech.

Neil

There's more about this on our website at bbclearningenglish.com. Join us again for 6 Minute Grammar.

Neil and Catherine

Bye.