

Reported Speech: Backshifting, Commands & Facts

INTERMEDIATE

Focus: Present simple to past simple, Modal shifts (will/would, can/could), Reporting verbs in the past tense, Maintaining direct speech vs reported speech, Tell somebody to (do), Ask somebody to (do), Negative commands (not to do), Reporting imperatives, Optional tense shifts for current facts, Reporting situations that are still true

To report what someone said, we often change the tense of the verb (backshifting) and use reporting verbs like **said**, **told**, or **asked**.

1. Tense Backshifting (Statements)

When the reporting verb is in the past (e.g., *He said...*), we usually push the tense back one step into the past.

Direct Speech	Reported Speech (Backshift)
Present Simple	Past Simple
"I like coffee."	He said (that) he liked coffee.
Modals (will / can)	Modals (would / could)
"I will call you."	She said (that) she would call me.
"I can't swim."	He said (that) he couldn't swim.

Note: We do not change the past simple into the past perfect in this specific focus; we are focusing on Present to Past shifts.

2. Commands, Requests, and Imperatives

When reporting an order (imperative) or a polite request, we use the pattern:

Verb + Person + (not) + to + Infinitive.

Common reporting verbs: *tell*, *ask*.

- **Positive Command:** "Sit down." → He **told** me **to sit** down.
- **Request:** "Please help me." → She **asked** him **to help** her.
- **Negative Command:** "Don't go." → He **told** us **not to go**.

3. Reporting Facts and Permanent Situations

If the statement is a general fact or a situation that is **still true** at the time of reporting, you do not have to change the tense (though you can if you want).

- **Direct:** "The sky **is** blue." (Fact)
- **Reported:** He said that the sky **is** blue. (No change needed because it is still true).
- **Reported:** He said that the sky **was** blue. (Also correct).

Practice: Fill in the Blanks

Instructions: Complete the sentences using the correct form of the verb. Pay attention to tense backshifting, command structures (infinitive), and negative forms.

Context:

- If the sentence is a **command/request**, use to + verb or not + to + verb.
- If the sentence is a **statement**, backshift the tense (Present → Past) or Modals (Will → Would, Can → Could).
- If the sentence is a **general fact** or **still true**, look for context clues, but generally backshifting is the standard practice for learners unless specified.

1. (Direct: "I want a new car.")

He said that he _____ (want) a new car.

2. (Direct: "Please don't smoke here.")

The manager asked the customer _____ (not/smoke) there.

3. (Direct: "I don't know the answer.")

Did he admit that he _____ (not/know) the answer?

4. (Direct: "Water freezes at 0 degrees.")

The teacher explained that water _____ (freeze) at 0 degrees. (General Fact)

5. (Direct: "I can help you tomorrow.")

She told me that she _____ (can/help) me the next day.

6. (Direct: "Open your books.")

Why did the teacher tell the students _____ (open) their books?

7. (Direct: "I won't be late.")

She promised that she _____ (not/be) late.

8. (Direct: "Do your homework!")

My mother told me _____ (do) my homework immediately.

9. (Direct: "I live in London.")

He said that he _____ (live) in London. (Situation is still true, but use standard backshifting practice).

10. (Direct: "Don't touch the painting.")

The guard warned the visitors _____ (not/touch) the painting.

11. (Direct: "I don't feel well.")

She said that she _____ (not/feel) well yesterday.

12. (Direct: "Will you come to the party?")

Did she ask you _____ (come) to the party? (Reporting a request).

13. (Direct: "The sun rises in the east.")

He said that the sun _____ (rise) in the east. (General Fact - keep present).

14. (Direct: "I am not happy with the results.")

Did the boss say that he _____ (not/be) happy with the results?

15. (Direct: "Please wait for me.")

She asked her friend _____ (wait) for her.

Answer Key

1. **wanted** (Backshift: Present Simple → Past Simple)
2. **not to smoke** (Negative Request: ask + person + not to + infinitive)
3. **didn't know** (Backshift: Present Simple Negative → Past Simple Negative)
4. **freezes** (Fact: Can remain in Present Simple)
5. **could help** (Backshift: Can → Could)
6. **to open** (Command: tell + person + to + infinitive)
7. **wouldn't be** (Backshift: Won't → Wouldn't)
8. **to do** (Command: tell + person + to + infinitive)
9. **lived** (Standard Backshift: Present Simple → Past Simple)
10. **not to touch** (Negative Command: warn/tell + person + not to + infinitive)
11. **didn't feel** (Backshift: Present Simple Negative → Past Simple Negative)
12. **to come** (Request: ask + person + to + infinitive)
13. **rises** (Fact: Can remain in Present Simple)
14. **wasn't** (Backshift: Present Simple 'to be' Negative → Past Simple 'to be')
15. **to wait** (Request: ask + person + to + infinitive)