

3.09 Reporting structures

If you want to 'report', or repeat, what someone else has said or written, there are two ways of doing this:

Direct speech

This is when you repeat exactly the original words. In writing, this would be in the form of a quotation:

Milburn (1966) claims that "attack is the best form of defence".

Research conducted by Aggers & Blowers (1993) suggested that "laughter is by nature a social activity".

In your academic writing it is usually best to keep direct quotations short, and not to include too many. See Guide 1.13 for further information on this subject.

Indirect speech/Reported speech

This is when the writer's or speaker's words or thoughts are summarised or paraphrased and integrated into your own writing. As well as the actual process of summarising the information in your own words, it may be necessary to change some language such as words referring to time and place and/or verb tenses.

Time and place

Imagine that in 1998 Mouskouri wrote the following about the economic situation in Greece:

Unemployment here is likely to gradually rise over the next two years.

If you are using this information in 2012, you would have to write:

Mouskouri (1998) reported that there would be a slight rise in unemployment in Greece between 1998 and 2000.

If you don't make changes such as this, you would be giving confusing, false information and may give your tutor the impression that you haven't understood what you have read.

Other words or phrases which may need to be changed would include: *last year, three years ago, this century, next year, five years from now, nowadays; in this country, our government etc.*

Verb tenses

If you are reporting general facts, opinions or theories which are still true today, these would normally be introduced in your writing with an appropriate verb in the present tense and no changes to verbs in the original may be necessary.

So if Collingwood wrote in 1999:

The importance of Elgar in the development of British music has been greatly exaggerated. His music is at best lightweight and derivative; mostly, however, it shows a complete lack of emotion or true musical form.

you would write:

*Collingwood (1999) **claims** that Elgar's music **has been** overrated as it is technically lacking and devoid of feeling.*

Collingwood's ideas are the same now as in 1999, and Elgar's music is the same as when it was written, so the verb tenses do not change.

If, however, you are reporting what someone actually said, or are referring to surveys, experiments, findings etc from the past, you would then introduce these with a verb in the simple past tense, and it may be necessary to change some, or all, of the verbs in the original, unless you are again referring to facts or situations which are still true. The most important thing is avoid any ambiguity.

For example, if a survey respondent said several years ago:

I find it impossible to understand lecturers with strong regional accents.

you would write:

*One respondent **said** that she **found** it impossible to understand strong accents.*

as it is quite possible that her understanding has improved.

However, if the survey was very recent, or if you are sure that the respondent's situation has not changed, you would probably write:

*One respondent said that she **finds** it impossible to understand strong accents.*

If the situation has definitely changed, then it is necessary to change the verb tense. If in 1987 Chandrasekar wrote:

The education system is undergoing major developments at the moment. Some underperforming schools have been closed down and it is likely that many other schools will merge in the near future.

You would write:

*Chandrasekar (1987) described the changes which **were taking place**, pointing out that some schools **had closed** and that others **would** probably merge.*

This is how verbs change:

Original wording	Reported wording
Simple present <i>The government considers...</i>	Simple past <i>The government considered...</i>
Present progressive <i>Numbers are rising...</i>	Past progressive <i>Numbers were rising...</i>
Present perfect <i>The system has been changed</i>	Past perfect <i>The system had been changed</i>
Simple past <i>He received the letter yesterday</i>	Past perfect* <i>He had received the letter the day before.</i>
Past progressive <i>The university was intending ...</i>	Past perfect progressive <i>The university had been intending...</i>
Will <i>"I will do it at once."</i>	Would <i>She said she would do it at once</i>
Can <i>Children can marry at the age of 14.</i>	Could <i>Children could marry at the age of 14.</i>

* note that the simple past very often does not change. The modal verbs would, should, could, might, ought and must also usually remain unchanged.

SUMMARY OF REPORTING VERBS

Note that some reporting verbs may appear in more than one of the following groups.

1. Verbs followed by 'if' or 'whether' + clause:

ask know remember	say see
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2. Verbs followed by a **that-clause**:

add admit agree announce answer argue boast claim comment complain confirm consider deny	doubt estimate explain fear feel insist mention observe persuade propose remark remember repeat	reply report reveal say state suggest suppose tell think understand warn
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3. Verbs followed by either a **that-clause** or a **to-infinitive**:

decide expect guarantee hope	promise swear threaten
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4. Verbs followed by a **that-clause containing should** (but note that it may be omitted, leaving a subject + zero-infinitive):

advise beg demand	insist prefer propose	recommend request suggest
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5. Verbs followed by a clause **starting with a question word**:

decide describe discover discuss explain forget guess	imagine know learn realise remember reveal say	see suggest teach tell think understand wonder
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6. Verbs followed by **object + to-infinitive**:

advise ask beg command	forbid instruct invite	teach tell warn
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(adapted from: www.edufind.com/english/grammar/rep7.cfm)

When you use information from books you have read you need to choose a suitable reporting verb to introduce it. This choice will depend on why you are using the information. What role in supporting your argument does it have? There are three basic reasons for using a reporting verb:

- to present the aim of the study you are summarising/quoting, e.g. *Smith (1999) examines the relationship between diabetes and heart disease.*
- to talk about the results that the author you are summarising/quoting has found, e.g. *Al-Mawali (2002) shows that deaths per capita in accidents are particularly high in developing countries.*

- to give the opinion of the author you are summarising/quoting, e.g. *Marklin (1998:76) argues that 'the adoption of just-in-time delivery systems was the decisive factor for Japanese economic success in the 1980's.*

The following table summarises some of the most common reporting verbs. N.B. some verbs (marked *) can be used to introduce either Results or Opinion, depending on the context/grammar.

Aim of Study	Results	Opinion
investigate	show (that)	state (that)
examine	suggest (that)*	believe (that)
analyse	find (that)	argue (that)
look at	indicate (that)	note (that)*
focus on	identify (x) as	point out (that)*
consider	reveal (that)	observe (that)*
identify	establish (that)	consider (that)
report (on)	confirm (that)	hold (that)
be concerned with	conclude (that)*	claim (that)

You may want to add a comment after the paraphrase/quotation to make its significance clear to the reader: '*This means that ...*' '*This shows that ...*'

Verb tense

The tense most commonly used for reporting verbs is the present simple (see examples above). However, other tenses are also important:

The past simple: of course, it can be used to show that something happened / was written a long time ago, e.g. '*This was demonstrated in the 1984 WHO report.*' But it is also used in two other ways:

- to increase the 'distance' between you, and what you are referring to, e.g. *Lefevbre (2002) identified (x) as the main cause of (y)* (but you think he may be wrong).
- in scientific writing, to present methodology/results of one specific piece of research, e.g. '*Data was obtained, and was cross-checked by... / Brown found*

that...The results were consistent with...' (N.B. when you move from 'results' to 'discussion/conclusion', it is usual to move from past simple to present simple, e.g. *'Therefore, the findings indicate that ...'*. At this point, you are moving from describing what happened in one piece of research, to what may always/frequently happen, i.e. you are *generalising*.)

The present perfect: this is used to introduce a topic by talking about general research in the area, e.g. 'Various studies have looked at ...', or 'Few researchers have investigated...'

(adapted from: www.efl.arts.gla.ac.uk/writing/repverbs.html)

More on tense changes

The one-tense-further-back rule

There is a general rule which says that when we use a reporting verb in the past, as above, the verbs used in the original speech are usually moved one tense further back. Thus:

will / shall future = would
is going to future = was going to
can / may future = could / might
present progressive future = past progressive
present simple future = past simple
present perfect future = past perfect
past simple future = past perfect

This happens because the time and place where we are reporting the action are different from where the original words were spoken. See what happens in the following examples and note the pitfalls:

Present and future patterns

The Prime Minister said: 'I shall co-operate fully with the enquiry.'

The PM told the press that he would co-operate fully with the enquiry

(Take care to use would when reporting future shall / will. If we used should here, it would suggest obligation and that is not what is meant.)

'You don't look very well. You should really stay in bed today.'

I told her she didn't look very well and should really stay in bed.

I advised her to stay in bed.

(Note that there is no past form of the modal verb *should*, meaning obligation, so it cannot move one tense further back.)

'Are you going shopping this afternoon? Could you get me some toothpaste?'

I asked her if she was going shopping and could get me some toothpaste.

I asked her to get me some toothpaste if she was going shopping.

Similarly there is no past form of *could* for future requests, so it cannot move one tense further back either. The same applies to *might* for suggestions:

'We might go out for a drink later on, if you're free.'

They suggested we might go out for a drink later, if we were free.

Compare this with the way in which *can* changes to *could*:

'I can't read this small print without my glasses.'

He admitted that he couldn't read the small print without his glasses.

Past patterns

'How did you find your way here in the dark? The paths are not marked.'

I asked her how she had found her way here as the paths are not marked.

(Note that because the lack of paths is an ongoing situation, we would probably retain the present tense even in the reported situation)

'We've met before, haven't we?' ~ 'No, I don't think we have.'

He thought we had met before, but I was quite sure we hadn't.

Past perfect remains past perfect

Like **should / might / could** in the earlier examples, the past perfect used in direct speech cannot move one tense further back in indirect speech:

'If only I had taken your advice, I would have saved myself a lot of money.'

He regretted / was sorry that he hadn't taken my advice.

He admitted that had he but taken my advice, he would have saved himself money.

On-going situation: no tense change

We have already noted an instance of this in the 'paths' example, above. Here are two further examples of where it may or may not be appropriate to change the tense:

I told her that I love her...and hope to marry her one day.

I told her that I loved her...but it was a lie.

Daughter: I'm going out now, dad.

Mother (out of earshot): What did she say?

Father: She said she's going out.

Granny: Where's Jenny?

Father: She's out.

Granny: She didn't tell me she was going out.

Father: She told me she was going out.

When reporting verb is in present or future: no tense change

Note that when we use present or future reporting verbs, the situation we are reporting has not changed, so there is no tense change:

'Where's Paul?'

She wants to know where Paul is.

'Did he phone?'

I don't know if he phoned.

'Has he left already?'

I don't think he's already left. No.

'We've got tickets for the match, so we'll be able to join you.'

I'll tell Kevin you've got tickets and will be joining us. He'll be well pleased.

'I shall not be resigning over this issue.'

A spokesman from the Ministry has confirmed that the Minister will not be resigning over this issue.

(adapted from: www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/grammar/learnit/learnitv309.shtml)