

Passing on messages and conversations

French B1 (intermediate) · Lesson

Quick answer: Reported speech in French retells someone's words with a verb such as *dire que*, *expliquer que* or *demander si*. When the reporting verb is in the past, the tenses shift back: present to imparfait, passé composé to plus-que-parfait, futur to conditionnel. Pronouns and time words also change: *demain* becomes *le lendemain*.

Level: French B1 (CEFR intermediate) · **Standards:** CEFR B1, Spoken production

How do you report what someone said?

In reported speech you retell the words instead of quoting them. There are no quotation marks, and the sentence is introduced by a reporting verb plus *que*. Unlike English "that", *que* is never optional.

Examples

Samia dit : « Je suis pressée. » → Samia dit qu'elle est pressée. — Samia says she is in a hurry.

Samia a dit : « Je suis pressée. » → Samia a dit qu'elle **était** pressée. — Samia said she was in a hurry.

When the reporting verb is in the present, the tense stays. When it is in the past, the tense shifts back, as in English.

phrase d'origine		discours rapporté
présent	→	imparfait
passé composé	→	plus-que-parfait
futur	→	conditionnel
futur proche	→	aller à l'imparfait

Tense changes after a reporting verb in the past.

Original	Reported
« J'ai faim. »	Il a dit qu'il avait faim.
« J'ai signé. »	Elle a dit qu'elle avait signé.
« Je viendrai. »	Il a dit qu'il viendrait.
« Je vais partir. »	Elle a dit qu'elle allait partir.

The imparfait and the plus-que-parfait do not change.

What else changes besides the tenses?

Pronouns and possessives follow the new speaker: mon becomes son. Time and place words also shift, because the moment of speaking has passed.

Direct	Reported (past)
aujourd'hui	ce jour-là
demain	le lendemain
hier	la veille
maintenant	alors
ici	là

How do you report questions and orders?

Rule

For a yes/no question use *si*: Elle m'a demandé si j'avais réservé. For a question word keep it: Il a demandé où j'habitais. For *qu'est-ce que* use *ce que*. Never invert the subject and never add a question mark. For an order use *de* + infinitive: Le médecin m'a dit de me reposer.

« Je suis en retard. »

Elle a dit qu'elle
était en retard.

Awa parle

vous rapportez

From direct speech to reported speech.

Watch out

English says "He told me he was late" and "He said to me". French needs the right pattern: Il m'a dit qu'il était en retard, never Il a dit moi. The person you speak to is an indirect object:

dire à quelqu'un, demander à quelqu'un de.

Culture

Newspapers often use the conditional to report an unconfirmed fact: Le ministre aurait démissionné — the minister reportedly resigned. It signals "I cannot verify this".

Zoé's tip

To report quickly, ask three questions: Who is speaking now? Is my reporting verb in the past? Have the time words changed? If yes to the second, shift the tense back.

Key points to remember

- After a past reporting verb: présent becomes imparfait, passé composé becomes plus-que-parfait, futur becomes conditionnel.
- Statements use que, yes/no questions use si, and orders use de + infinitive.
- Hier becomes la veille, demain becomes le lendemain, aujourd'hui becomes ce jour-là.
- Reported questions have no inversion and no question mark.
- With a present reporting verb (il dit que), the tense does not change.

Passing On Messages and Conversations: frequently asked questions

Does the tense always change in French reported speech?

No. It changes only when the reporting verb is in the past. After il dit que, the present stays present, as in il dit qu'il est fatigué.

How do I report a yes/no question in French?

Use si after the verb demander and drop the inversion: Elle m'a demandé si j'avais réservé. There is no question mark.

How do I report an order or a request?

Use dire de or demander de followed by an infinitive: Il m'a demandé d'envoyer le dossier. A negative order becomes de ne pas + infinitive.

What is the difference between dire and demander?

Dire que reports a statement, demander si or demander + question word reports a question, and dire de or demander de reports an order.

Which verbs can introduce reported speech?

The most useful are dire, expliquer, demander, répondre, annoncer, ajouter and raconter. They all take que except demander, which takes si or de.