

Retelling what people say and ask

French 3 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: Reported speech retells what someone said after a reporting verb. When that verb is in the present, the tense does not change. Use *dire que* for statements, *demander si* for yes-or-no questions, and *ce que* or *ce qui* for what-questions. Pronouns and possessives shift to match the person who spoke.

Level: French 3 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Low) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Low, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational

What is reported speech in French?

Direct speech repeats someone's exact words. Reported speech (*le discours indirect*) retells those words through a reporting verb such as *dire* or *demander*. When that verb is in the present, the tense of the original sentence stays the same. Only the pronouns, the possessives and the sentence structure change.



A present-tense reporting verb leaves the tense alone; only the person changes.

How do you report a statement with *dire que*?

Rule: reporting verb + *que*

Write the reporting verb, then *que* (never dropped), then a full clause. *Que* becomes *qu'* before a vowel or a mute *h*. Then adjust the person so that it fits the speaker.

Direct	Reported	Example
je	il / elle	Idriss dit qu' il a faim.

Direct	Reported	Example
tu (said to me)	je	Lou dit que je chante bien.
nous	ils / elles	Les jumeaux disent qu' ils gagnent.
mon, ma, mes	son, sa, ses	Awa dit que sa mère arrive.
notre, nos	leur, leurs	Ils disent que leur bus est en retard.

How do you report a yes-or-no question?

Rule: demander si

Use demander si followed by normal word order: subject, then verb. No inversion and no est-ce que. Before il and ils, si becomes s'; before elle it stays si.

Examples

Paul à Jade : « Est-ce que tu as mon écharpe ? »

Paul demande à Jade **si** elle a son écharpe. — Paul asks Jade if she has his scarf.

Manon demande **s'il** y a un train pour Annecy. — Manon asks if there is a train to Annecy.

How do you report questions with a question word?

Question words such as où, quand, pourquoi, comment and combien stay the same, and so does qui. The two long forms with qu'est-ce change: qu'est-ce que and que become ce que, and qu'est-ce qui becomes ce qui.

DIRECT	REPORTED
Tu viens ?	si / s'il / s'ils
Qu'est-ce que...	ce que / ce qu'
Qu'est-ce qui...	ce qui
Où... ? Quand... ?	où, quand (inchangé)

Four question types and what they become after demander.

Examples

Kofi à Élise : « Qu'est-ce que tu cherches ? » → Kofi demande à Élise **ce qu'**elle cherche.

Mme Roy : « Qu'est-ce qui sent si bon ? » → Mme Roy demande **ce qui** sent si bon.

Théo à Yara : « Où est-ce que tu habites ? » → Théo demande à Yara **où** elle habite.

Common mistake

English can drop "that": "She says she is tired." French cannot: Elle dit qu'elle est fatiguée. Also, English "asks if" never takes est-ce que in French, and ce qui or ce que is not the same as qu'est-ce: say Il demande ce que tu veux, never Il demande qu'est-ce que tu veux.

Culture note

In French novels, spoken lines are often marked with guillemets (« ») or with a dash at the start of each line. Narration then retells the same words in reported speech.

Zoé's tip

Ask two questions before you write: who is speaking now, and what kind of sentence is it?
Statement: que. Yes-or-no: si. What-question: ce que or ce qui.

Key points to remember

- With dire or demander in the present, the verb of the original sentence keeps its tense.
- Statements use que (qu' before a vowel); yes-or-no questions use si (s'il, s'ils).
- Qu'est-ce que becomes ce que, and qu'est-ce qui becomes ce qui; où, quand, pourquoi, comment stay the same.
- Je becomes il or elle, nous becomes ils or elles, mon becomes son, notre becomes leur.
- After demander, never use inversion or est-ce que.

Retelling What People Say and Ask: frequently asked questions

Does the tense change in French reported speech?

Not when the reporting verb is in the present. Elle dit qu'elle a faim keeps the present tense of the original sentence. Tense shifts only appear when the reporting verb is in a past tense.

When do you use si and when do you use que?

Use que after dire for a statement. Use si after demander for a yes-or-no question. Si becomes s' before il and ils, but stays si before elle and elles.

What is the difference between ce que and ce qui?

Ce que replaces the object of the question (qu'est-ce que tu veux), and ce qui replaces the subject

(qu'est-ce qui se passe). Ask yourself whether the thing is doing the action or receiving it.

Can I use est-ce que after demander?

No. After demander, the question becomes a normal clause with subject then verb: Il demande si tu viens, not Il demande est-ce que tu viens.

How do pronouns and possessives change?

They follow the person who spoke. Je becomes il or elle, nous becomes ils or elles, mon becomes son, and notre becomes leur. A tu addressed to the reporter becomes je.