

Retelling what was said in the past

French 4 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: When the introducing verb is in the past (il a dit que, elle a demandé si), French shifts the tenses back: présent becomes imparfait, passé composé becomes plus-que-parfait, and futur becomes conditionnel. Time words change too: hier becomes la veille, demain becomes le lendemain, aujourd'hui becomes ce jour-là. Pronouns and possessives follow the new speaker.

Level: French 4 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Mid) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Mid, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational, WL 4.1 Language Comparisons

How do tenses shift in reported speech?

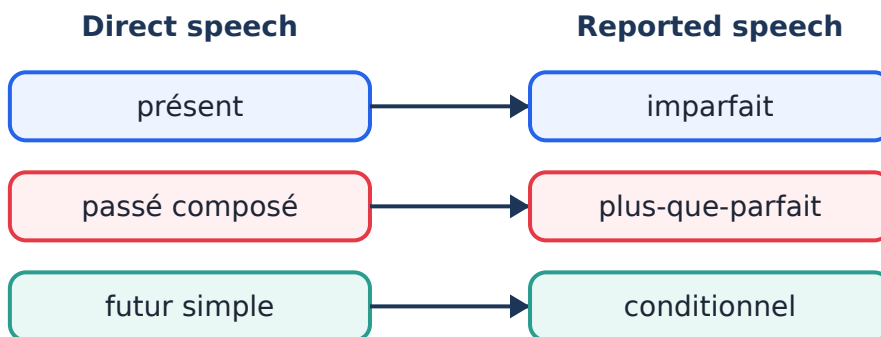
Rule

If the introducing verb is in a past tense, every verb of the original sentence moves one step back in time. This is called la concordance des temps.

Direct speech	Reported speech
présent	imparfait
passé composé	plus-que-parfait
futur simple	conditionnel présent
futur proche	allait + infinitive
futur antérieur	conditionnel passé
imparfait, plus-que-parfait, conditionnel	no change

Examples

- « Je suis fatiguée. » → Maëlle a dit qu'elle **était** fatiguée. — Maëlle said she was tired.
- « J'ai perdu mon billet. » → Idriss a dit qu'il **avait perdu** son billet. — Idriss said he had lost his ticket.
- « Nous partirons à huit heures. » → Ils ont annoncé qu'ils **partiraient** à huit heures. — They announced they would leave at eight.



Each verb steps back one level when the introducing verb is in the past.

Which time words change?

Direct	Reported
aujourd'hui	ce jour-là
hier	la veille
demain	le lendemain
ce soir	ce soir-là
la semaine prochaine	la semaine suivante
la semaine dernière	la semaine précédente



The reported day names look at the past event from the day it was spoken.

What about questions and commands?

Yes/no questions use *si*: « Tu as faim ? » → Il m'a demandé **si** j'avais faim. Other questions keep their word, with normal word order: Elle m'a demandé **où** j'habitais. Qu'est-ce que becomes *ce que*. Commands use *de* + infinitive: « Ferme la porte ! » → Il m'a demandé **de fermer** la porte. Pronouns and possessives follow the new speaker: *je* → *il*, *mon* → *son*.

Common mistake

English speakers keep "tomorrow" and "yesterday" and sometimes keep the present tense. In French reported speech after a past introducing verb, write *le lendemain* and *la veille*, and shift every verb. Do not say *il a dit qu'il viendra demain.

Culture note

In everyday conversation, speakers sometimes keep the present for a fact that is still true (Elle m'a dit qu'elle habite à Dakar). In French class, essays and exams, the full tense shift is expected.

Zoé's tip

First look at the introducing verb: if it is past (a dit, a demandé), shift the tenses. Then change every time word and pronoun. Check them in this order: verbs, time words, pronouns.

Key points to remember

- Present becomes imparfait; passé composé becomes plus-que-parfait; futur simple becomes conditionnel présent.
- Futur proche (va + infinitive) becomes allait + infinitive.
- Imparfait, plus-que-parfait and conditionnel stay unchanged.
- Hier / demain / aujourd'hui become la veille / le lendemain / ce jour-là.
- Questions use si or an interrogative word; commands use de + infinitive.

Retelling What Was Said in the Past: frequently asked questions

When do I not change the tense in reported speech?

If the introducing verb is in the present or the future (Il dit qu'il est fatigué), the tense does not change. Verbs already in the imparfait, plus-que-parfait or conditionnel also stay the same.

How do I report a futur proche sentence?

Put aller in the imparfait and keep the infinitive. « Je vais appeler Léa » becomes Il a dit qu'il allait appeler Léa.

What replaces hier and demain in reported speech?

Hier becomes la veille and demain becomes le lendemain. Aujourd'hui becomes ce jour-là, and la semaine prochaine becomes la semaine suivante.

How do I report a yes/no question?

Use si followed by normal word order and the shifted tense: « Tu viens ? » becomes Elle m'a demandé si je venais. Do not use est-ce que in the reported clause.

How do I report an order or request?

Use a verb like demander, dire, conseiller or ordonner with de plus an infinitive: « Ferme la fenêtre ! » becomes Il m'a demandé de fermer la fenêtre.