

Grammar notes: reporting verbs

Summary

The most important basic aspects of reported speech that you have to remember are:

changes in verb tenses

"I'm going home"

He said he was going home

changes in expressions of time

"I'm going home tomorrow"

He said he was going home the following day

changes in personal pronouns and possessive adjectives

"I'm going to my uncle's home tomorrow"

He said he was going to his uncle's home the following day

When you first learn reported speech these are the aspects you need to practise. The verbs you use, therefore, are basic ones like say, tell, reply, and ask.

However, if you had to interview someone, for example, and then wrote about what the person said, it would be very boring and repetitive if you used only these verbs.

There are a lot of other verbs you can use to describe or summarise what people say without repeating the same thing over and over again. These verbs give us the meaning of the original words without actually using them all.

The section below shows some of these 'reporting verbs' with their meanings and grammatical structures. You can often use verbs you wouldn't normally associate with reported speech, but if they describe the meaning of the original words then use them!

Some basic reporting verbs

The grammar structures I've shown with these verbs are not necessarily the only structures possible. I've tried to show the ones I think are the most usual. The meaning of some verbs changes according to the structure used, so I've only included structures that have the same meaning.

accuse

to accuse someone of doing something

"It was you who ate my chocolate, Elvira, wasn't it?"

He accused Elvira of eating his chocolate.

admit

to admit doing something

to admit that...

"OK, it was me. I ate your chocolate"

Elvira admitted eating the chocolate.

Elvira admitted that she had eaten the chocolate.

advise

to advise someone to do something

"Well, if I were you I'd start saving for my retirement."

He advised me to start saving for my retirement

agree

to agree that...

"Yes, you're right, it's a terrible problem."

She agreed that it was a terrible problem.

announce

to announce that...

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news. The company's closing."

The manager announced that the company was closing.

apologise

to apologise (to someone) for doing something

"I'm sorry I didn't get to the meeting."

He apologised for not going to the meeting.

ask

to ask someone to do something

"It's very hot in here. Would you mind opening the window?"

She asked him to open the window.

blame

to blame someone for doing something

"We lost the match because you didn't save that penalty."

He blamed the goalkeeper for losing the match.

complain

to complain about something

"The electrician said he was coming at ten o'clock so I took time off work and waited in all morning...."

She complained about the electrician.

congratulate

to congratulate someone on doing something

"Well done! I knew you'd pass your driving test this time."

She congratulated him on passing his driving test.

deny

to deny doing something

to deny that...

"It most certainly wasn't me that left the front door open."

He denied leaving the front door open.

He denied that he had left the front door open.

explain

to explain why...

to explain that...

"Sorry I'm late. The traffic was bad and then I couldn't find a parking space."

He explained why he was late.

He explained that the traffic was bad.

forget

to forget to do something

"Oh no, I haven't got any money. I didn't go to the bank."

He forgot to go to the bank.

invite

to invite someone to do something

"Would you like to come to our house for dinner on Friday?"

He invited them to come to dinner on Friday.

offer

to offer to do something for someone

"Those bags must be heavy, John. Shall I take one?"

She offered to carry a bag for him.

promise

to promise to do something

"Yes, honest, I'll be there on time. I won't be late."

He promised not to be late.

refuse

to refuse to do something

"Well I'm not washing up. I did it last time."

He refused to do the washing-up.

remind

to remind someone to do something

"Remember you have to go to the bank. You forgot yesterday."

She reminded me to go to the bank.

suggest

to suggest that someone should do something

to suggest that someone do something

"Why don't you go to the dentist if your tooth hurts?"

She suggested that he should go to the dentist.

She suggested that he went to the dentist.

threaten

to threaten to do something

"If you're late again we'll start without you."

They threatened to start without him.

warn

to warn someone about something

to warn someone (not) to do something

"Don't drive too quickly. The streets are very icy."

He warned him about the ice.

He warned him not to drive too quickly.