Grammar notes: reported speech

Definition

Reported speech is often also called indirect speech. When we use reported speech, we are usually talking about the past (because obviously the person who spoke originally spoke in the past). The verbs therefore usually have to be in the past too. For example:

"I'm going to the cinema".
He said he was going to the cinema.



Basic tense chart

The tenses generally move backwards in this way (the tense on the left changes to the tense on the right):

present simple I'm a teacher.	past simple He said he was a teacher
present continuous I'm having lunch with my parents.	past continuous. He said he was having lunch with his parents.
present perfect simple I've been to France three times.	past perfect simple He said he had been to France three times.
present perfect continuous I've been working very hard.	past perfect continuous He said he had been working very hard.
past simple I bought a new car.	past perfect He said he had bought a new car.
past continuous It was raining earlier.	past perfect continuous He said it had been raining earlier.
past perfect The play had started when I arrived.	past perfect NO CHANGE POSSIBLE
past perfect continuous I'd already been living in London for five years.	past perfect continuous NO CHANGE POSSIBLE

Other verb forms

Other verb forms also sometimes change:

will I'll come and see you soon.	would He said he would come and see me soon.
can I can swim under water for two minutes.	could He said he could swim under water for two minutes.
must All tickets must be bought in advance.	had to He said that all tickets had to be bought in advance.
shall What shall we do about it?	should He asked what we should do about it.
may May I smoke?	might He asked if he might smoke.

Things are slightly more complicated with imperatives.

positive imperative Shut up!	tell + infinitive He told me to shut up.

negative imperative Don't do that again!	tell + not + infinitive He told me not to do it again.
imperatives as requests Please give me some money.	ask + infinitive He asked me to give him some money.

When verbs don't follow the rules

1. The verb tenses do not always follow the rules shown above. For example, if the ***reporting verb is in the present tense, there is no change in the reported sentence. Also, a sentence in direct speech in a present or future tense can remain the same if what is said is still true or relevant***. For example:

You've invited someone for dinner at your house, and the phone rings. It's them! They say:
I'm sorry, but I think I'm going to be a bit late. There's a lot of traffic.

After you finish speaking on the phone, you say to someone else:
That was Juan. He said he thinks he's going to be late because there's a lot of traffic.

Another example:

A friend says to you:
María's ill. She's got chickenpox!

You say to someone else:
Laura said that María's ill. She's got chickenpox.

However, the following day you see María at the beach. You're surprised and say to her:
Laura said that you were ill. She said you had chickenpox.

This has to change to the past because it isn't true. María obviously isn't ill.

2. **Direct statements in a past tense do not always change either, because a change might alter the meaning or just make it sound confusing**.

For example:

A friend is telling you about the horrible weather:
It started raining heavily when I left work.

This is where things get confusing:

He said it had started raining heavily when he had left work (it sounds horrible and the sentence is almost nothing but verbs).

He said it had started raining heavily when he left work (is wrong because it means it was already raining when he left work)

He said it started raining heavily when he left work (is the best version because it is accurate, short, and there is no confusion because of the time context)

Generally speaking, the past simple and continuous don't always need to be changed if:

there is a time context which makes everything clear,

and/or

there is another action already using the past perfect, which might alter the meaning or make things confusing.

Time and place references

Time and place references often have to change:

now	then

today	that day
here	there
this	that
this week	that week
tomorrow	the following day the next day the day after
next week	the following week the next week the week after
yesterday	the previous day the day before
last week	the previous week the week before
ago	previously before
2 weeks ago	2 weeks previously 2 weeks before
tonight	that night
last Saturday	the previous Saturday the Saturday before
next Saturday	the following Saturday the next Saturday the Saturday after that Saturday

Examples:

I went to the theatre last night.
He said he had gone to the theatre the night before.

I'm having a party next weekend.
He said he was having a party the next weekend.

I'm staying here until next week.
He said he was staying there until the following week.

I came over from London 3 years ago.
He said he had come over from London 3 years before.

Personal pronouns

You also need to be careful with personal pronouns. They need to be changed according to the situation. You need to know the context. For example, there is possible confusion when you try to change reported speech to direct speech:

She said she'd been waiting for hours.
(Is she one person or two different people?)

I told them they would have to ask permission.
(Are we talking about two groups of people or only one?)