

# Direct and Indirect Reporting of Discourse

# 26

Any statement, whether spoken or written, can be reported *directly*—by quotation of the actual words. Or it can be reported *indirectly*—by a paraphrase of those words. In this chapter we explain when and how to use each method of reporting discourse.

## 26.1 DIRECT REPORTING

Use **direct reporting** when the exact words of the original statement are memorable or otherwise important. Enclose the words in quotation marks:

“The vilest abortionist,” writes Shaw, “is he who attempts to mould a child’s character.”

Frost puts four stresses in his opening line: “The well was dry beside the door.”

For a full discussion of how to punctuate quotations, [see chapter 32](#).

### USING TENSES IN TAGS

Since no statement can be reported until after it has been made, you should normally use the past tense for the verb in the accompanying tag:

“No child should be homeless,” *said* the nurse.

“I agree with you completely,” *answered* the orderly.

In 1782 Thomas Jefferson *wrote*: “There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us.”

But use the present when you are quoting an undated statement of lasting significance or a statement made by a character in a work of literature:

“In every work of genius,” *observes* Emerson, “we recognize our own rejected thoughts.”

In the first chapter of *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck says, “I don’t take no stock in dead people.”

### QUOTING EXTENDED DIALOGUE

In reporting an exchange between two speakers, you should first indicate clearly who is speaking and in what order. You can then omit tags until the dialogue ends or is interrupted:

“Our market surveys indicate,” Hurts said, “that there are also a lot of kids who claim their parents don’t listen to them. If they could rent a gun, they feel they could arrive at an understanding with their folks in no time.”

“There’s no end to the business,” I said. “How would you charge for Hurts Rent-A-Gun?”

“There would be hourly rates, day rates, and weekly rates, plus ten cents for each bullet fired. Our guns would be the latest models, and we would guarantee clean barrels and the latest safety devices. If a gun malfunctions through no fault of the user, we will give him another gun absolutely free. . . .”

“Why didn’t you start this before?”

“We wanted to see what happened with the gun-control legislation. . . .”

—Art Buchwald, “Hurts Rent-A-Gun”

Paragraph indentations mark the shift from one speaker to another.

### QUOTING SEVERAL LINES OF PROSE OR POETRY

When you quote more than four lines of prose or three lines of poetry, you should indent instead of using quotation marks, as described in sections [32.4](#) and [32.5](#).

## 26.2 INDIRECT REPORTING OF STATEMENTS

Use **indirect reporting** when the exact words of a statement are less important than their content:

During the campaign, the senator said that she favored federal subsidizing of daycare.

Form indirect statements as shown here:

**ORIGINAL STATEMENT:** I want you to play the lead.

**DIRECT REPORT (QUOTATION):** The director said, "I want you to play the lead."

**INDIRECT REPORT:** The director said that she wanted me to play the lead.

As this example shows, an indirect report does the following:

1. It refers to the speaker or writer.
2. It uses no quotation marks.
3. It often puts *that* just before the reported statement. But *that* may be omitted:

The director said she wanted me to play the lead.

4. It changes the pronouns in the reported statement where necessary. In this example, *I* becomes *she*, and *you* becomes *me*.
5. It may change the tense of the verb in the original statement so that it matches the tense of the introductory verb. Thus *want* in the original statement becomes *wanted* in the indirect report. But if the original statement has continuing force at the time it is reported, the indirect report may keep the original tense:

The director said that she wants me to play the lead.

Generalizations may be reported with the present tense for both verbs:

Farmers say that rain before seven means sun by eleven.

They also say that when cows lie down, a storm is coming.



## 26.3 DIRECT REPORTING OF QUESTIONS

To report a question directly, you normally use a verb of asking (such as *ask*, *request*, or *inquire*) in the past tense:

The Sphinx asked, “What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?”

“Have you thought about college?” my father inquired.

“When did the plane leave?” I asked.

Use the present tense when you are reporting a question of standing importance or a question asked by a literary character:

The consumer advocate asks, “How can we have safe and effective products without government regulations?”

The business owner asks, “How can we have free enterprise with government interference?”

When Tom Sawyer proposes to form a gang that will rob and kill people, Huck asks, “Must we always kill the people?”

## 26.4 INDIRECT REPORTING OF QUESTIONS

To report a question indirectly, you normally introduce it with a verb of asking and a word like *who*, *what*, *whether*, *how*, *when*, *where*, *why*, or *if*:

**ORIGINAL QUESTION:** Why do birds migrate each year?

**INDIRECT REPORT:** The teacher asked why birds migrate each year.

The indirect report drops the auxiliary verb *do*, which is commonly used in questions. Also, the question mark becomes a period.

Use the present tense for the introductory verb when reporting a question of continuing importance or a question asked by a literary character:

The consumer advocate asks how we can have safe and effective products without government regulation.

When Tom Sawyer proposes to form a gang that will rob and kill people, Huck asks whether they must always kill the people.

After a past-tense verb of asking, you must normally use the past tense in the reported question:

The interviewer asked me what I knew about programming.

She also asked if I had an advanced degree.

But you may use the present tense if the reported question is essentially timeless:

The utilitarian asks what practical purpose poetry serves.

The romantic asks how we could live without it.

## 26.5 CONFUSING THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT REPORTING OF QUESTIONS

1. Do not use a question mark to punctuate the indirect report of a question:

\*The customer sat down at the counter and asked did we have any scruples?

The **direct report** of a question repeats its actual words and ends in a question mark:

**EDITED:** The customer sat down at the counter and asked, “Do you have any scruples?”

The **indirect report** of a question states that a question has been asked. It must end with a period:

**EDITED:** The customer sat down at the counter and asked if we had any scruples.

2. When reporting a question indirectly, do not use interrogative word order:

\*The police officer asked when was the car stolen.

The direct report of a question preserves its word order, putting the auxiliary verb before the subject:

**EDITED:** The police officer asked, “When was the car stolen?”

The indirect report uses declarative word order, putting the subject first:

**EDITED:** The police officer asked when the car was stolen.

## 26.6 FITTING QUOTATIONS INTO YOUR OWN PROSE

The combination of your own prose and a quotation should always make a complete, coherent sentence:

According to Phyllis Rose, “We shop to cheer ourselves up.”

Ambrose Bierce defines achievement as “the death of endeavor and the birth of disgust.”

Barbara Garson writes: “The crime of modern industry is not forcing us to work, but denying us real work.”

### MISFITTED QUOTATIONS

A quotation is misfitted when it fails to combine with your own prose to make a complete, coherent sentence:

\*According to Orwell, “When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims.”

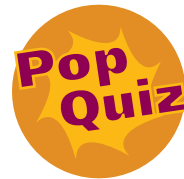
This sentence fragment lacks a main clause, and it leaves the reader guessing about what happens “when there is a gap.” To correct the error, do one of the following:

1. Quote a complete sentence:

**EDITED:** According to Orwell, “When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttle fish squirting out ink.”

2. Make the quoted matter part of a complete sentence:

**EDITED:** According to Orwell, one resorts to obscure language “when there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims.”



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