

DIRECT AND INDIRECT SPEECH

Direct speech (quotation) and indirect (reported) speech are two different ways to express what somebody says or said. You should not shift between the two in the same sentence.

Direct speech quotes what a person said or asked. Direct speech should therefore be marked by quotations marks.

Nel: "Where are we going, Mom? Are we leaving today?"

Mrs. Wright: "We are going to New Orleans to visit your great-grandmother. She is very ill. Your aunt called me yesterday."

Nel: "I have never been on such a long trip. How long will it take to get to New Orleans? Will we take the train?"

Mrs. Wright: "Yes, we will take the train. We should reach New Orleans the day after tomorrow."

The above is a little dialogue written in direct speech. Let us assume that Mr. Wright, Mrs. Wright's husband, overheard the exchange and reported it to a friend. His report would be expressed in **indirect or reported speech**:

Yesterday, Nel asked my wife Helene about their trip and whether they would be leaving that day. Nel wanted to know where they were going. Helene replied that they were going to go to New Orleans to visit Helene's grandmother, Nel's great-grandmother. Helene also told Nel that her great-grandmother was ill and that Nel's aunt had called her the day before. Nel then remarked that she had never been on such a long trip. She asked how long it would take to reach New Orleans and whether they would take the train. Helene answered that they would take the train and that they would reach New Orleans in two days.

The above examples show how **direct speech changes when a writer uses indirect speech**:

A **direct question** turns into a sentence with a verb of inquiry (*ask, want to know*). Note that if the verb of inquiry is in the past tense, the tense changes throughout the sentence:

Nel: "Where are we going?"

→ *Nel wants to know where they are going. Nel wanted to know where they were going.*

A **direct statement** turns into a sentence with a verb of speaking (*say, tell, remark ...*):

Nel: "I have never been on such a long trip."

→ *Nel remarks that she has never been on such a long trip. Nel remarked that she had never been on such a long trip.*

Future tense in direct speech turns into conditional if the verb is in the past tense:

Nel: "Will we be leaving today?"

→ *Nel asked whether they would be leaving that day.*

Time indicators change when you turn direct speech into indirect speech:

“Today” turns into “that day”.

Nel: “Are we leaving today?”

→ *Nel asks/asked whether they will/would be leaving that day.*

“Yesterday” turns into “the day before”.

Mrs. Wright: “My sister called me yesterday.

→ *Mrs. Wright told Nel that her sister had called her the day before.*

“Tomorrow” turns into “the next day”; “the day after tomorrow” becomes “in two days.”

Nel: “Will we be there tomorrow?” Mrs. Wright: “No, we will be there the day after tomorrow.”

→ *Nel asked if they would be there the next day, but her mother answered that they would be there in two days.*

SHIFTS BETWEEN DIRECT AND INDIRECT SPEECH

It is, of course, possible to use both direct and indirect speech in a passage, but you have to prepare your reader for the change. In general, though, if a shift between direct and indirect speech occurs without warning in the same sentence, the reader gets confused.

⊗ *I wonder whether Sula knew about the accident, and if so, did she ever tell Nel*

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⊗ *Nel asked Sula about the insurance settlement and did she pay for college with the money.*

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⊗ *Nel told Sula to have a good time in Cincinnati and be sure to send Eva a postcard.*

⊙ *Nel told Sula to have a good time in Cincinnati and reminded her to send Eva a postcard.*

► Did you like the sample sentences? Get the whole story in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*.