

Difference between SAY, TELL, SPEAK, and TALK

If you frequently confuse the verbs SAY, TELL, SPEAK, and TALK, you're not alone - these are some of the most commonly confused English words!

They seem like they all mean the same thing - and they are similar - but we actually use them differently in English. In this lesson, Learn the difference between say, tell, speak, and talk, and it will help you avoid some common mistakes with these words.

Tell / Told

Tell means "to give information to a person" - so **tell** (present) and **told** (past) are always followed by a person.

Examples:

- **Tell me** about the movie. Did you like it?
- Peter, I **told you** not to eat any cookies before dinner!
- Did you **tell Sam** about what happened at school today?
- The police **told us** that the situation was under control.
- Derek and Melissa **told everybody** that they were engaged to be married.
- You should **tell her** what you think about her idea.
- Don't worry, I won't **tell anyone** your secret.

Say / Said

With **say** (present) or **said** (past), we can use these structures:

1. **say (something)**
2. **say that (something)**
3. **say (something) to (a person)**
4. **"(something)" a person said**

Examples:

1. Francis **says** she doesn't like chocolate.
2. I **said that** the new website design was great.
3. What did the teacher **say to you** when you failed the test?

4. "Nice to meet you," Harry **said**.

Structures #1 and #2 are the most common in spoken English.

Don't make this common mistake!

- ~~He said me~~ that he had to leave.
- He **told me** that he had to leave.

Speak / Spoke

Use **speak** (present) and **spoke** (past) with languages, and with talking in general (no specific details). We can use **speak with (someone)** and **speak to (someone)**

Examples:

- I **speak** English.
- Does Donna **speak** Italian?
- Emma is going to **speak** in front of 500 people at the conference.
- We **spoke** to the boss this morning. (general conversation, no specific details)
- I need to **speak** with you about the new project. (general topic, no details)

In the case of **speak with (someone)** and **speak to (someone)**, you can also say **talk to** or **talk with**.

However, you can't use "talk" with languages:

- ~~I don't talk~~ Chinese.
- I don't **speak** Chinese.

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