

SAY – TELL – TALK – SPEAK

Explanation and Examples

Using SAY, TELL, SPEAK and TALK can be very confusing. Sometimes they are similar and sometimes they are very different! Here are the main differences, plus some practice exercises:

SAY

MEANING: To speak specific words

HOW IT'S FORMED: SAY + SOMETHING (+ to SOMEONE)

SAY usually includes the words that were said, either as reported speech or as a quotation

SAY with reported (indirect) speech:	SAY with quoted (direct) speech:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> He's saying hello. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> He said hello to his new neighbor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> He said, "Hello, neighbor!"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> She's saying that she wants to have lunch together. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> She'll say, "Let's have lunch." <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> "Let's have lunch," she said to us.
<p>Avoid this common mistake:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> She said him about her vacation plans. <p>SAY cannot take an indirect object. Try TELL or ASK instead:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> She told him about her vacation plans. 	

TELL

MEANING: To give specific information to someone

HOW IT'S FORMED: TELL + SOMEONE (+ (about) SOMETHING / to VERB)

TELL almost always includes name(s) of the receiver(s) of the information

TELL with reported (indirect) speech:	TELL with quoted (direct) speech:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I'm telling him about my project. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I'll tell him to help with my project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> "I have a big new project," I told him.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> She told the truth about her mistake. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> She told us that she made a mistake. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> She'll simply tell them, "I made a mistake."
<p>Avoid this common mistake:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> He told that he wants to open a coffee shop. <p>TELL almost always has an indirect object. Try SAY instead:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> He said that he wants to open a coffee shop. 	

TALK

MEANING: To say things in a general and less formal sense

HOW IT'S FORMED: TALK (+ to/with SOMEONE) (+ about SOMETHING)

TALK and SPEAK do not use quoted (direct) speech – they don't give us specific words

- ✓ He talked to his new neighbor.
- ✓ He's talking with his new neighbor.

- ✓ Let's talk about our vacation plans.
- ✓ We talked together until 3:00am.

Avoid this common mistake:

✗ *They talk Spanish.*

TALK and SPEAK are similar, but TALK isn't used for languages:

- ✓ *They speak Spanish.*
- ✓ *They are talking in Spanish.*

SPEAK

MEANING: To say things in a general and more formal sense

HOW IT'S FORMED: SPEAK (+ to/with SOMEONE) (+ about SOMETHING)

or SPEAK (+ in) + LANGUAGE NAME

TALK and SPEAK do not use quoted (direct) speech – they don't give us specific words

- ✓ She's speaking about her plan to open a coffee shop.
- ✓ She spoke with the manager for about ten minutes.

- ✓ I haven't spoken about my idea to anyone.
- ✓ I need to speak with you about something important.

- ✓ They were speaking in French.
- ✓ She speaks Korean.

Avoid this common mistake:

✗ *We should speak about your vacation plans.*

Because SPEAK is formal, it's not for fun subjects. Try these:

- ✓ *Tell me more about your vacation plans.*
- ✓ *I'd like to hear about your vacation plans.*