

Say or tell, speak or talk?

Say, tell, speak and *talk* are four commonly used verbs which are very easy to confuse. Here's a summary of how each verb is used and comparing the differences in meaning.

Here we will look at them in pairs, *say* & *tell* which are often used to report speech and *speak* & *talk* which refer to the act of verbal communication but not used to report speech.

Say & Tell

- ☞ We use 'say' **without** an object immediately after the verb. 'Say' is used to quote both **direct** and **indirect speech**, for example:

*"I'll call today" said Ellie.
Ellie **said** she would call today.*

*"It isn't far from here to the station." they said.
They **said** it wasn't far from here to the station.*

- ☞ We use 'tell' **with** an object immediately after the verb. It is used mainly for **indirect speech** It is often used to give an order or instruction, for example:

*She **told her husband** to switch off the TV.
The teacher **told us** to answer all the questions.*

- ☞ 'Say to' is used with the same form as 'tell'. The meaning is also the same when information is being passed between two or more people.

Note the different forms when using 'say to' or 'say':

- ☞ 'tell' + object
*Dr Mansfield **told James** that he should take more exercise.*
- ☞ 'say to' + object.
*Dr Mansfield **said to James** that he should take more exercise.*
- ☞ 'say' without object
*Dr Mansfield **said** that James should take more exercise.*

The difference with this last example is that we don't know who the doctor was talking to.

Practice

Use either 'tell' or 'say' in the correct form to complete these sentences:

1. You should always what you mean.
2. Why don't you me what's wrong?
3. That's what she to me this morning.
4. John I could leave early today.
5. Will you Lucy I'm waiting for her?
6. I can't believe she just that!
7. You should him the truth!
8. She looked upset. What did you to her?

Speak & Talk

- ☞ Often 'speak' and 'talk' can have the same use and meaning when used to refer to communication between two or more people:

*Can we **talk about** this tomorrow? I'm tired.
Let's **speak about** this tomorrow, it's late.*

*I just **spoke to** Joni and Adam and they're happy with the new website.
I **talked to** Joni and Adam and they're really happy with the design.*

- ☞ 'Speak' is sometimes used to refer to the communication of one person to another or group of others. 'Talk' suggests more of a two-way dialogue or an informal chat between two or more people. Compare the difference between these examples:

*He **spoke to** an audience of thirty delegates at the conference.
We look forward to **talking to** other delegates at the conference.*

*Will you **speak to** Mike? I think he needs some encouragement.
I was just **talking to** your sister; we had a very interesting conversation.*

- ☞ 'Speak' can have a slightly more formal and serious tone than 'talk', compare these examples:

*I'm going to **speak to** my manager about the new staff rota.
I need to **talk to** my boss, I'm not happy with the new rota.*

*Alison is going to **speak about** our work at the conference next month.
What did you **talk about** at the pub last night?*

- ☞ 'Speak' is used to express the ability to communicate in a certain language:

*Dani **speaks** Russian and Mandarin fluently.*

- ☞ 'Speak' is used when requesting someone on the phone:

*Hello, this is Jane Anderson. Please can I **speak** to Mr. Holland?*

Practice

Use either **speak** or **talk** in the correct form to complete the sentences. Sometimes either verb is possible:

1. I don't want to about it just now.
2. Please can I to the manager?
3. Hanna loves to her friends on the phone.
4. You and Dan just never stop when you're together.
5. They're not to each other at the moment, they've fallen out.
6. We couldn't believe it when he started Japanese.
7. Is Emily going to at the Annual General Meeting tomorrow?
8. Please will you stop? I'm trying to listen to the music!