

## say OR tell?

The verbs **say** and **tell** have similar meanings. They both mean "to communicate verbally with someone". But we often use them differently.

The simple way to think of **say** and **tell** is:

- You say something
- You tell someone something

You say something	You tell someone something
Ram said that he was tired.	Ram told Jane that he was tired.
Anthony says you have a new job.	Anthony tells me you have a new job.
Tara said: "I love you."	Tara told John that she loved him.

But, of course, it is not always so easy. Here are a few rules to help you.

### Personal object

We usually follow **tell** with a personal object (the person that we are speaking to). We usually use **say** without a personal object:

- She told me that she loved John.
- She said that she loved John.
- He told everybody that he had to leave.
- He said that he had to leave.

### Say "to someone"

With **say**, we sometimes use "to someone":

- He said to me that he was tired.
- Tara said to Ram that he had done very well.
- Anthony said to her, "I hope you come soon."
- "I'd like to sleep," she said to him quietly.

### Direct speech

We can use **say** with direct speech. We use **tell** only with direct speech that is an instruction or information:

- Amanda said, "Hello John. How are you?"
- "That's great," she said.
- He told her: "Open the door quietly."
- She told me, "I have never been to England."

We can use **say** with direct questions, but we cannot use **tell**:

- She said: "Do you love me?"
- The policeman said to the prisoner, "Where were you at 8pm?"

## Reported speech

We can use *say* and *tell* to talk about reported information:

- She said that it was raining.
- She told me that she would call at 2pm.

We cannot use *say* or *tell* to talk about reported questions. We must use *ask* (or a similar verb):

- She asked if I had ever been there.
- They asked what I wanted to eat.
- She asked where he lived.
- He asked if she wanted to go home.

## Orders, advice

We use *tell* + *object* + *infinitive* for orders or advice:

- She told him to sit down.
- They told me not to wait.
- Tell Neil to have a holiday and forget her.

## Phrases

Here are a few fixed phrases with *tell*. We cannot use *say* with these phrases:

- tell (someone) a story
- tell (someone) a lie
- tell (someone) the truth
- tell the future (= to know what the future will bring)
- tell the time (= know how to read a clock)

## Right and wrong

Read these examples of correct and incorrect usage:

right	wrong	Because we cannot...
Tara told Jo to go away.	Tara <del>said Jo to go away.</del>	<b>say</b> someone to do something
Josh told me that she was hungry.	Josh <del>said me that she was hungry.</del>	<b>say</b> someone something
He said that he likes coffee.	He <del>told that he likes coffee.</del>	<b>tell</b> something
Luke told me that she was coming.	Luke <del>told to me that she was coming.</del>	<b>tell</b> to someone
Luke said to me that she was coming.		
Sarah always tells lies.	Sarah always <del>says lies.</del>	<b>say</b> a lie
Ramon said to Nok: "Let's turn on the TV." (Ramon told Nok, "Turn on the TV.") (Ramon told Nok: "I was born in 1985.")	Ramon <del>told Nok: "Let's turn on the TV."</del>	<b>tell</b> somebody "direct speech" (except instructions and information)
She asked if I wanted to come.	She <del>said if I wanted to come.</del>	<b>say</b> or <b>tell</b> a reported question
Gina asked what I wanted to do.	Gina <del>told what I wanted to do.</del>	