

## TALK / SPEAK / SAY / TELL

Using TALK correctly

**Talk**<sup>1</sup> is used in **two ways**:

- Talk is *the only one* of these four verbs that describes the pure act of opening one's mouth and producing meaning-giving sounds.

My nephew is only two years old, and he **talks** very well.

That guy **talks** all the time. He's never heard the expression, "Silence is golden."

- Talk may also be used as follows:

Hello, may I please **talk to** Bill Thompson?

I haven't **talked to** Caroline since last week.

### RULE: TALK TO + PERSON

**NOTE:** In general, **talk** does not take a direct object.

- You **say** things. (You do not "talk" things.)
- Do not use **talk** in reported speech. Use **say** or **tell** when reporting.

He **said** he was coming.  
I **said** I'd help them later.

He **told** me he was coming.  
I **told** them I'd help them later.

**Talk** is frequently used to mean **discuss**.

We **talked about** getting together when the trial was over.  
We **talked about** it.

He and I were supposed to **talk about** the tax implications of that move.

**Talk** forms a part of many phrasal verbs. Below are two of the most common:

(1) **talk into** : persuade, convince

They **talked me into** taking that I.P.<sup>2</sup> seminar with them.  
They **talked me into** it.

I'm trying to **talk Mike into** working with us. We need his help.  
I'm trying to **talk him into** it.

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<sup>1</sup> talk / talked / talked

<sup>2</sup> intellectual property

- (2) **talk out of** : persuade, convince *not* to take an action

My wife **talked me out of buying** a new car. (She convinced me not to spend the money.)

I was going to buy a new car, but my wife **talked me out of it**.

**Talk** has two frequent uses as a noun:

- (1) (give) a talk : a speech

She gave an interesting **talk** on international trade issues and the TRIPS agreement.

- (2) (have) a talk : an informal conversation

I'd like to have **a talk** with some of my staff members, but it's so hard to find the time.

**Talk** is used negatively in the following fixed expressions:

**Talk** is cheap.

Jim is all **talk**.<sup>3</sup>

**NOTE** A **talker** is very different from a **speaker**.

A **talker** is a person who *only* talks. A **talker** does not act. The sense is negative.<sup>4</sup>

A **speaker** is typically a person who has been invited to talk, or to speak, because he/she has something interesting or worthwhile to say to the group.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This expression is used *about* a third person. It means that Jim *only* talks – he does not act, nor does the speaker believe he ever will act.

<sup>4</sup> “He’s just a **big talker**.” Is a common expression in referring to people like this.

<sup>5</sup> A common way to refer to speakers is to say “**guest speaker**.”

## TALK/SPEAK/SAY/TELL

Using **SPEAK** correctly

**Speak**<sup>6</sup> is typically used in **two ways**:

- As a request for conversation

May I **speak to** Tom Smith, please?  
I'd like to **speak to** your manager if he's in.

In this sense, **speak to** is interchangeable with **talk to**.

**RULE: SPEAK TO + PERSON**

- **Speak** is the **only verb** that can refer to **language** (whether native or foreign language). Examples:

A: How many languages does Benny **speak**?  
B: He **speaks** ten languages fluently.

Latin is no longer a **spoken** language.

**Speech** (noun) always refers to **language production**:

He doesn't **speak** very well. I wonder if he has a **speech** impediment.

I have a hard time understanding them. They use a lot of slang terms in their **speech**.

She gave an interesting **speech** on international trademark issues.  
(*Give a speech* has the same sense as *give a talk*.)

### NOTE

**Avoid** the expression "*speak of*."

**Use** the expression ***talk about***, instead.

**Inappropriate:** We *spoke of* the patent valuations at time of transfer.

**Appropriate:** We ***talked about*** the patent valuations at time of transfer.

Native speakers use the expression "*speak of*" in poetry and religion:

Petrarch<sup>7</sup> *spoke of* the beauty of Laura, a young woman he loved.

Religious prophets often *speak of* a life after man's life on earth.

It is not appropriate to use *speak of* in science, business or law.

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<sup>6</sup> speak / spoke / spoken

<sup>7</sup> A famous Italian poet.

## TALK/SPEAK/SAY/TELL

Using **SAY** correctly

**Say**<sup>8</sup> is typically used to **repeat** statements made.

He **said** he could help us on Saturday.

She always **says** we should call her if we have any questions.

Do **not** use **say** when including the person spoken to:

**Incorrect:** He said to us (that) he could help us on Saturday.  
She always says to us (that) we should call her.

**Correct:** He told us (that) he could help us on Saturday.  
She always tells us (that) we should call her.

The only time to include “the person spoken to” with **say** is in the *fixed* question:

What did you say to him?  
What did they say to you?

Even with these questions, the correct answers remain:

What did you say to him?  
**I told him.** . . .

What did they say to you?  
**They told me.** . . .

The **most typical** question and answer **patterns** are as follows:

A: What did she say?  
B: She said she'd like to protect her invention.

A: What did you say after that?  
B: I said we'd be happy to help her file for a patent.

The noun, **a saying**, means **a proverb**.

A proverb / saying is a little lesson that is **repeated** from person to person.

**Proverbs** are often difficult to translate because each culture has its own.

Proverbs / sayings are **fixed expressions**: Following are two examples:

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.  
A picture is worth more than a thousand words.

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<sup>8</sup> say / said / said

## TALK/SPEAK/SAY/TELL

Using TELL correctly

**Tell**<sup>9</sup> is the verb used to **include** the speaker, the audience, and the message.

Joe	told me	he would meet us downtown.
<b>SPEAKER</b>	<b>AUDIENCE</b>	<b>MESSAGE</b>
We	will tell <i>them</i>	the best time to go.
Sue	never tells <i>us</i>	anything about her personal life.

**Incorrect:** That's what I told.

**Correct:** That's what I said. - or - That's what I told them.

The noun, **a tale** is a story.

A *fairy tale* is a story that a parent tells a small child.

Speaker	(parent)
Audience	(child)
Message	(story)

**TELL** is frequently used (in idiomatic English) to mean *know, distinguish, determine*.

**For example:**

I **can't tell** the difference between those two sisters. They look exactly alike to me.

I know very little about stereo equipment. As a result, it's hard for me **to tell** the difference between<sup>10</sup> one type of stereo component and another.

A: What's wrong with this printer?

B: I **can't tell**. I'll have to call the computer assistance hotline.

<sup>9</sup> tell / told / told

<sup>10</sup> **Note** the full construction of this phrase: **tell the difference between X and Y**

**TALK/SPEAK/SAY/TELL  
STRUCTURE EXERCISES**

**Directions:** Re-express the following sentences using **say**.

1. She told me she'd meet me at 4:30.
2. Jack told us it was very simple to apply for a patent, but very difficult to defend it later.
3. The judge told us to amend the complaint pursuant to his remarks.
4. Alice always tells them to keep her posted on any changes in the registration procedures.

**Directions:** Re-express the following sentences using **tell**.

5. Tom always says he wants to come with us.
6. Cynthia said she'd be a few minutes late.
7. Sharon said they'd call before leaving.
8. Sharon said to call before leaving.

**\* NOTE:** Use any object (me/us/them/him/her) after *tell* or *told* in exercises 5-8 above. The purpose is to practice.

**TALK/SPEAK/SAY/TELL  
ANSWERS TO STRUCTURE EXERCISES**

**Directions:** Re-express the following sentences using **say**.

1. She told me she'd meet me at 4:30.

**She said she'd meet me at 4:30.**

2. Jack told us it was very simple to apply for a patent, but very difficult to defend it later.

**Jack said it was very simple to apply for a patent, but very difficult to defend it later.**

3. Benny told me to meet him there.

**Benny said to meet him there.**

4. The judge told us to amend the complaint pursuant to his remarks.

**The judge said to amend the complaint pursuant to his remarks.**

**Directions:** Re-express the following sentences using **tell**. \*

5. Tom says he wants to come with us.

**Tom told me/us he wants to come with us.**

6. Cynthia said she'd be a few minutes late.

**Cynthia told me she'd be a few minutes late.**

7. Sharon said they'd call before leaving.

**Sharon told me they'd call before leaving.**

8. Sharon said to call before leaving.

**Sharon told us to call before leaving.**

\* **NOTE:** You can use any object (me/us/them/him/her) after *tell* or *told* in exercises 5-8 above. The purpose is to practice.

**TALK/SPEAK/SAY/TELL  
FLUENCY EXERCISES**

**Directions:** Answer the following questions, starting with a complete sentence. Feel free to show me your answers.

1. How many languages do you speak? How many languages does your secretary speak?
2. What did you talk about at your last meeting?
3. When was the last time you spoke to your family?
4. What did you talk about with them?
5. What did they say?
6. Who did you talk to first? Who did you talk to last?
7. When was the last time you talked to your office?
8. Who is the most talkative person in your family?
9. Have your kids ever talked you into doing something you hadn't planned to do? If so, what?

Has your spouse ever talked you out of doing something you had planned to do? If so, what?

10. Have you ever given a speech to a large group? If so, what did you talk about?