

# English Ladder

Student Workbook

## Speak, Talk, Say, Tell

A polished self-study handout designed for print or tablet use. Read the concept, notice the pattern, and then complete the matching practice set on your own.



Grammar Concepts #36

Key Points

Summary and Additional Examples

Exceptions and Special Cases

### Visual anchor

Use the concept poster to spotlight the main language pattern in **Speak, Talk, Say, Tell** and keep the explanation visible during practice and discussion.

**ENGLISH LADDER**

Concept #36 ► Speak | Talk | Say | Tell

The four words below are often confused. Be sure to use them correctly.

**Speak**  
You can "speak" loudly, quietly, politely, and with an accent. You can "speak" French or Spanish. You "speak" to an audience if making a largely formal presentation. If you "speak your mind" (idiom), you are giving your honest opinion.

**Say**  
If you "say" what someone else said, you are usually repeating their exact words such as in "Tom said: I'm coming." You can also say "He said (to me) he would come." But you can not omit the "to" such as in "He said me he would come."

**Talk**  
You can "talk" loudly, quietly, politely, and with an accent. When a baby utters her first words we say "She's talking!" If you are giving "a talk" to an audience, it is often more of a casual two-way conversation than when you give a formal speech.

**Tell**  
When "telling" someone what Tom said, you usually don't use Tom's exact words. You only convey the main idea as in "He told me he would come." You can "tell" a joke, a story, a lie, and the truth. You can also "tell" (order) someone to do something.

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## Core Idea

The four words speak, talk, say, and tell are often confused by non-native English speakers because their meanings can overlap, but they are used in different contexts. Here's a comprehensive explanation to help you understand how to use each one correctly.

### Quick reference

1. Speak	Formal Presentation: "She spoke at the conference about climate change." "The president spoke to the nation last night."
2. Talk	Casual Conversations: "We talked about the movie we watched last night." "Can we talk later? I'm a bit busy right now."
3. Say	Quoting Someone: "Tom said, 'I'm coming.'" "She said that she would be late."
3. Say	Incorrect: "He said me he would come."
4. Tell	Giving Information: "He told me the news." "Can you tell me your name?"
4. Tell	Incorrect: "He told that he would come."

## Key Points

### 1. Speak

"Speak" generally refers to the act of using your voice to say something, often in a more formal context. It can be used to describe both the ability to use a language and the action of communicating.

- Formal Presentation: "She spoke at the conference about climate change." "The president spoke to the nation last night."
- Language Ability: "He speaks three languages: English, Spanish, and Mandarin." "Do you speak French?"
- Expressing an Opinion: "You should speak your mind if you disagree." "He spoke out against the injustice he witnessed."
- Speaking Manner: "She spoke quietly so as not to disturb anyone." "Please speak loudly so everyone can hear you."

### 2. Talk



"Talk" is similar to "speak" but is often used in more casual or informal situations. It is also commonly used for conversations involving more than one person.

- Casual Conversations: "We talked about the movie we watched last night." "Can we talk later? I'm a bit busy right now."
- Two-way Communication: "I like to talk with my friends about our weekend plans." "She talked to her boss about getting a promotion."
- Giving a Speech or Lecture: "He gave a talk on the history of jazz." "They invited her to talk at the seminar."
- Expressing Opinions: "Let's talk about what you think went wrong." "We need to talk this over before making a decision."

### 3. Say

"Say" is used when you want to repeat what someone has said or to express something directly. It focuses on the words spoken rather than the act of speaking.

- Quoting Someone: "Tom said, 'I'm coming.'" "She said that she would be late."
- Expressing a Statement: "He said he was tired." "What did you say to him?"
- Reported Speech: "He said (to me) that he would come." "She said she was not interested."

Important Note: When using "say," you usually need to include "to" when you specify the person you are speaking to (e.g., "He said to me that..."), but you omit it in direct speech.

- Incorrect: "He said me he would come."
- Correct: "He said to me he would come."

### 4. Tell

"Tell" is used when you want to convey information, instruct someone to do something, or recount a story. It typically involves giving information directly to someone.

- Giving Information: "He told me the news." "Can you tell me your name?"
- Instructing or Ordering: "She told him to clean his room." "The teacher told the students to open their books."
- Sharing Stories or Jokes: "He told a funny joke." "Can you tell us a story?"

Important Note: Unlike "say," "tell" requires an object (the person you are speaking to) and does not need the word "to."

- Incorrect: "He told that he would come."
- Correct: "He told me that he would come."

## Summary and Additional Examples



- Speak is used for more formal contexts or when referring to the act of using language: "She spoke at the ceremony."
- Talk is more informal and often refers to a two-way conversation: "They talked about their weekend plans."
- Say is used when repeating or reporting what someone has said: "He said he would be late."
- Tell is used when giving information or instructing someone: "She told him to finish his homework."

## Exceptions and Special Cases

While the above guidelines cover most situations, there are some exceptions and special cases where these words might be used differently.

### 1. Idiomatic Expressions:

Sometimes, these words are used in idiomatic expressions where the normal rules don't apply.

- Speak: "Actions speak louder than words." (Here, "speak" is used metaphorically.) "To speak volumes" means to convey a lot of information indirectly.
- Talk: "Talk is cheap." (This means it's easy to say something but harder to do it.) "To talk someone into/out of something" means to persuade them.
- Say: "It goes without saying." (This means something is so obvious that it doesn't need to be mentioned.) "To say the least" is used to express that something is actually more serious than stated.
- Tell: "Time will tell." (This means that the outcome will become clear in the future.) "To tell the truth" is a phrase used to introduce an honest statement.

### 2. Regional Variations:

In different English-speaking regions, the usage of these words might slightly vary.

- In British English, "talk" is more commonly used for informal conversation than in American English, where "speak" might be preferred even in casual settings.
- In some dialects, "say" and "tell" can be used interchangeably, though this is non-standard.

### 3. Politeness and Formality:

The choice between these words can also depend on the level of politeness or formality required.

- "Speak" is more formal than "talk": "May I speak with you?" vs. "Can we talk?"
- "Say" can be more neutral, while "tell" can sound more direct: "He said something to me." vs. "He told me something."

Understanding these subtleties will help you navigate complex conversations and express yourself more precisely in English. By practicing with these words and paying attention to context, you'll gain confidence in using them correctly in various situations.





## Practice Check

Answer the quiz questions below with responses consistent with the grammar concepts taught in this article.

### ITEM 01

**Which sentence is correct?**

- A) He speaks French fluently.
- B) He says French fluently.
- C) He tells French fluently.
- D) He talks French fluently.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

### ITEM 02

**Which sentence is correct?**

- A) She talked to me that she was coming.
- B) She said to me that she was coming.
- C) She spoke me that she was coming.
- D) She tell me that she was coming.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

### ITEM 03

**Select the sentence that uses "tell" correctly.**

- A) He tell me to close the door.
- B) He told to close the door.
- C) He told me to close the door.
- D) He told close the door.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 04**

**Which sentence correctly uses "talk"?**

- A) We should talk your manager.
- B) We should talk to your manager.
- C) We should talk with your manager.
- D) Both B and C are correct.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 05**

**Choose the correct sentence.**

- A) She said me that she would be late.
- B) She told me that she would be late.
- C) She said that she would be late to me.
- D) She talked me that she would be late.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 06**

**Identify the grammatically correct sentence.**

- A) Please speak louder so everyone can hear.
- B) Please say louder so everyone can hear.
- C) Please talk louder so everyone can hear.
- D) Please tell louder so everyone can hear.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 07**

**Which sentence is correct?**

- A) He gave a speak at the conference.
- B) He gave a talk at the conference.
- C) He gave a say at the conference.
- D) He gave a tell at the conference.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 08**

**Select the correct use of "say."**

- A) He said that he was tired.
- B) He talked that he was tired.
- C) He told that he was tired.
- D) He spoke that he was tired.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 09**

**Which sentence uses "speak" correctly?**

- A) She speaks quietly to avoid waking the baby.
- B) She says quietly to avoid waking the baby.
- C) She talks quietly to avoid waking the baby.
- D) Both A and C are correct.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 10**

**Choose the correct sentence.**

- A) He asked her to speak her mind.
- B) He asked her to tell her mind.
- C) He asked her to talk her mind.
- D) He asked her to say her mind.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 11**

**Identify the correct use of "tell."**

- A) He told me that he was tired.
- B) He said me that he was tired.
- C) He talked me that he was tired.
- D) He spoke me that he was tired.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 12**

**Which sentence is grammatically correct?**

- A) She gave a talk about her travels.
- B) She gave a speak about her travels.
- C) She gave a tell about her travels.
- D) She gave a say about her travels.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 13**

**Select the correct sentence.**

- A) Can you tell us a joke?
- B) Can you say us a joke?
- C) Can you speak us a joke?
- D) Can you talk us a joke?

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 14**

**Which sentence is correct?**

- A) She talked me to visit the museum.
- B) She told me to visit the museum.
- C) She said me to visit the museum.
- D) She spoke me to visit the museum.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 15**

**Identify the correct sentence.**

- A) He said to me that he was happy.
- B) He told me that he was happy.
- C) He talked to me that he was happy.
- D) Both A and B are correct.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 16**

**Which sentence uses "say" correctly?**

- A) She sayed that she was hungry.
- B) She said that she was hungry.
- C) She says that she was hungry.
- D) She telling that she was hungry.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 17**

**Choose the correct sentence.**

- A) He speaked at the event.
- B) He talked at the event.
- C) He said at the event.
- D) He tells at the event.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 18**

**Which sentence is correct?**

- A) She said that she was leaving.
- B) She told that she was leaving.
- C) She spoke that she was leaving.
- D) She talk that she was leaving.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 19**

**Select the grammatically correct sentence.**

- A) They spoke to the audience in a formal manner.
- B) They talked to the audience in a formal manner.
- C) They said to the audience in a formal manner.
- D) They told to the audience in a formal manner.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 20**

**Which sentence correctly uses "talk"?**

- A) Let's talk this over tomorrow.
- B) Let's speak this over tomorrow.
- C) Let's say this over tomorrow.
- D) Let's tell this over tomorrow.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 21**

**Identify the correct use of "speak."**

- A) He can speak several languages.
- B) He can say several languages.
- C) He can talk several languages.
- D) He can tell several languages.

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 22**

**Which sentence is correct?**

- A) She told to me the story.
  - B) She said me the story.
  - C) She told me the story.
  - D) She talked me the story.
- 

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 23**

**Choose the correct sentence.**

- A) Can I tell you something?
  - B) Can I speak you something?
  - C) Can I say you something?
  - D) Can I talk you something?
- 

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_

**ITEM 24**

**Which sentence uses "say" correctly?**

- A) He told he would come.
  - B) He said he would come.
  - C) He spoke he would come.
  - D) He talked he would come.
- 

Correct choice: \_\_\_\_\_



## Self-check Answer Key

Use the key after you have completed every item on your own.

**ITEM 01**

A) He speaks French fluently.

**ITEM 02**

B) She said to me that she was coming.

**ITEM 03**

C) He told me to close the door.

**ITEM 04**

D) Both B and C are correct.

**ITEM 05**

B) She told me that she would be late.

**ITEM 06**

A) Please speak louder so everyone can hear.

**ITEM 07**

B) He gave a talk at the conference.

**ITEM 08**

A) He said that he was tired.

**ITEM 09**

D) Both A and C are correct.

**ITEM 10**

A) He asked her to speak her mind.

**ITEM 11**

A) He told me that he was tired.

**ITEM 12**

A) She gave a talk about her travels.

**ITEM 13**

A) Can you tell us a joke?

**ITEM 14**

B) She told me to visit the museum.



ITEM 15

D) Both A and B are correct.

ITEM 16

B) She said that she was hungry.

ITEM 17

B) He talked at the event.

ITEM 18

A) She said that she was leaving.

ITEM 19

A) They spoke to the audience in a formal manner.

ITEM 20

A) Let's talk this over tomorrow.

ITEM 21

A) He can speak several languages.

ITEM 22

C) She told me the story.

ITEM 23

A) Can I tell you something?

ITEM 24

B) He said he would come.