

Say vs tell

CEFR A2 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

The object rule: say takes the words, tell takes the person, plus the fixed phrases that ignore the pattern.

The rule

Tell needs a person

- Tell + person + something: "I told her the answer."
- Tell + person + about something: "He told us about the trip."
- Tell + person + to do something: "She told me to wait."
- The person comes directly after tell, with no preposition: tell me, tell him, tell the class.

Say does not need a person

- Say + something: "She said goodbye."
- Say + something + to + person: "She said goodbye to me."
- Never say "say me". The person needs the preposition to after say.
- Say + (that) + clause: "He said that he was tired."

Fixed phrases with tell

- Tell the truth, tell a lie, tell a story, tell a joke, tell a secret, tell a tale.
- Tell the time, tell the difference, tell the future, tell fortunes.
- These phrases keep tell even when no listener is named: "He always tells the truth."
- Tell someone off means criticise them: "The teacher told him off."

Fixed phrases with say

- Say hello, say goodbye, say sorry, say thank you, say please, say yes, say no.
- Say a prayer, say a few words, say something, say nothing.
- Say a word about something: "She did not say a word about the price."
- Say so means state it: "If you think I am wrong, just say so."

Reported speech with say and tell

- Said and told both introduce reported speech, and both are followed by that or by nothing.
- "She said (that) she was busy" and "She told me (that) she was busy" are both correct.
- Told must keep its listener: "She told me that she was busy", never "She told that she was busy".
- In reported commands, use tell + person + to: "He told me to sit down."

Say and tell without a listener

- Tell can stand alone in the fixed phrases above: "The clock tells the time."
- Say works alone very often: "What did you say?", "I said nothing."
- When the listener is already clear, English often prefers say + to: "She said it to me twice."
- For general speech, say is the safer default; tell needs a person or a fixed phrase.

Questions

Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. She ___ me the answer.

2. He ___ that he was busy.

3. Please ___ me the truth.

4. She ___ hello to everyone in the room.

5. They ___ us a funny story.

6. He ___ me to wait outside.

7. What did she ___ to you?

8. Can you ___ the difference between the two pictures?

9. I did not ___ a word about the surprise.

10. My mother ___ me to be careful.

11. She ___ goodbye and left the party.

12. He ___ the teacher that he was late.

13. Do not ___ lies to your parents.

14. She ___ me about her holiday.

15. Can you ___ me the time, please?

16. He ___ nothing and walked away.

17. They ___ me that the shop was closed.

18. She said ___ me that she would come.

19. The teacher ___ the class a joke.

20. I ___ sorry for the mistake.

Answer key

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1. **told** — Tell takes the person directly after the verb: told me.
2. **said** — Without a listener, use said that; told would need a person.
3. **tell** — Tell the truth is the fixed phrase with tell.
4. **said** — Say hello is fixed with say, and the person follows to.
5. **told** — Tell a story takes the listener first: told us.
6. **told** — Reported commands use tell + person + to.
7. **say** — Say takes to before the person in questions like this.
8. **tell** — Tell the difference is a fixed phrase with tell.
9. **say** — Say a word is the fixed phrase with say.
10. **told** — Tell + person + to reports an instruction.
11. **said** — Say goodbye is fixed with say.
12. **told** — Tell takes the listener directly: told the teacher.
13. **tell** — Tell a lie is the fixed phrase with tell.
14. **told** — Tell someone about something keeps the listener after tell.
15. **tell** — Tell the time is fixed with tell, and the listener follows.
16. **said** — Say nothing describes speech with no listener named.
17. **told** — Tell + person + that introduces the reported statement.
18. **to** — Say needs to before a person: said to me.
19. **told** — Tell a joke takes the listener first: told the class.
20. **said** — Say sorry is fixed with say.