

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.

He told everybody that he had to leave.

She said that she loved John.

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.

Anthony said to her, "I hope you come soon."

Tara said to Ram that he had done very well.

"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

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)