

Perception and Communication Verbs



Some verbs related to perception and communication like *see* and *watch* or *speak* and *tell* are often confusing for learners of the English language. Some of the most important ones are explained here in order to make it easier for learners to use them correctly.

Speak, Talk, Say, Tell

The verbs *speak*, *talk*, *say* and *tell* are used to talk about producing language.

Speak

To speak is more physiological or referring to making sounds recognizable as language:

- Can you *speak* a bit louder. I can't hear you.
- Can you *speak* clearer.
- *Speaking* in public is difficult for most people, often even for those who do it frequently.

To speak is also used to specify which language.

- Do you *speak* Russian.

Talk

To talk is related to producing spoken language, normally having a connotation of communication or information being present.

- Betty was *talking* to her children about when she was their age.
- *Talk* to me.
- They were *talking* about how difficult it is to raise children, especially when they are in their teens.
- He is *talking* to himself.

Sometimes *to speak* can be used with these meanings.

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Say

To say is more related to the exact words (or exact message) or the way in which something is said, like the intonation.

- She **said**: "Do you need any help?"
- With a very ironic intonation he **said**: "This is good."
- They **said** no stone would be left unturned to find out the truth.

Tell

To tell is related to the message transmitted by spoken or written language.

- She **told** him to go.
- We were **told** that the aeroplane was late because of the weather.

See, Look, Watch

The verbs *see*, *watch*, *look* are used to talk about receiving visual information.

See

To see is more physiological. An image hits the eye and is noticed. You are conscious of it. The information comes to you. It is rather passive.

- It seems you are not **seeing** very well. Maybe you need spectacles.
- When I was waiting for the red traffic light, I **saw** some pedestrians crossing the street.
- When I was walking by the river, I **saw** a lot of boats.

Look

To look (at) is active, When you **look** (at something), you are active, you observe.

- We went to a museum to **look at** the exhibited pieces.
- **Look** there. What a beautiful sky.
- Many people like to go on holiday to ancient towns and **look at** the historic architecture.
- When I was walking by the river, I **looked at** some of the old sailing boats. They have always interested me.

Watch

To watch is like **to look (at)** but it is related to activities or processes, you observe. You **watch** *an* activity or you **watch** somebody or something that is doing something or that is moving.

- One of the things old people like doing is **watching** children play.
- My neighbour is crazy about football, every week he goes to **watch** the matches and when he can't go to the stadium, he **watches** them on TV.
- Our neighbours like **watching** films on TV.

Hear, Listen

The verbs **hear** and **listen** are used to talk about noticing sounds.

Hear

The most important meaning of **to hear** refers to the rather passive, more physiological process. A sound comes to the ear and is noticed.

- Do you hear that squeaking sound? What do you think it is? Maybe it is a monkey.
- I can't **hear** the radio, can you turn up the volume.
- Can you speak a bit louder. I can't **hear** you.

Another meaning of **to hear** is that it indicates the message that the listener understands for instance in slang, conflict or power situations.

- Yea man, I hear what you're saying.
- I hear you.
- Do I hear that right? Are you saying that you will not follow the instructions?
- I don't understand how you can do anything like that! I don't want you to cause any trouble again! Do you hear me!?

Listen

To listen is more active. One pays attention to things that come to the ear like, something that is said, music, sounds, and process available information.

- Teachers want the learners to **listen** to them.
- A mechanic, when taking a car for a test drive, will **listen** to the car because the sounds give a lot of information about the functioning of the car and the problems it has.

Difference between *listen* and *hear*

The difference between *to hear* and *to listen* is that *to listen* means paying attention to what is *heard*. This means that when using the word *to listen* the aspect of paying attention has to make sense. Paying attention doesn't seem to make much sense if it is not to receive information through what is heard. The information of what is heard, something that is said, the message, is actually in the mind, not in the sounds or words. The sounds, the words, the language have to be processed in the mind to deduce the information, to derive the message, the meaning.

Rather often, pupils of mine come up with sentences like *I listened on the radio that one of the ministers is probably involved in a corruption scheme*. There are some problems with using *to listen* like this. It doesn't make much sense to communicate that you paid attention. It is because you paid attention that you know this. What is interesting to communicate is that the information came to you from the radio, not that you paid attention. Also, before you can pay attention to something and process the available information, you have to notice it. This means that before you can listen to something you have to hear it. If you want to communicate that you know something because it was on the radio it is not really important to say that you paid attention. Communicating that you noticed it is sufficient. *I heard on the radio that one of the ministers is probably involved in a corruption scheme*.

Thinking or following rules

It is always important to think instead of just to follow rules. Many rules, especially simplified ones, tend to be inaccurate. An example of such simplified, inaccurate rule is: You *watch* TV and You *look at* a person. The difference isn't in the object, a TV or a person. The difference is in the characteristics of the visual information and in what you do with it.

Normally you *watch* a program on TV. You pay attention to the actions, the activities, the movements that you see on the TV screen. However, when your TV breaks down or if you don't like it any more, you will go to an electronics store and you will *look at* the different TV's. You will *look at* details like, ease of use, resources, size and image quality in order to decide if there is any TV that you would like to buy.

Here are some other cases where for choosing the correct verb, the more precise nature of the information that comes to you and how you process this information is more important than what this information is related to.

- When I study, I like to have the radio on. I sort of hear the music in the background but more important is actually that it filters away much of the background noise that would otherwise disturb me. I only start listening when an interesting song is being played or when there is something on the news catches my attention.
- Yesterday, in the park, I *saw* my cousin on the other side of the lawn. When he *saw* me, he started to cross crossed the lawn. We had a good look at each other. I said: "You have

changed a lot.” Apparently he didn’t think I had changed much. After chatting for a while we said goodbye and I **watched** him walking away. Only then, I noticed he was limping a bit. (*I **saw** my cousin* means that I noticed him but was not really paying attention to his appearance, actions or movements. *look at each other* means we paid attention to each others appearance. *I **watched** him walking away* means that I then did pay attention to his movements. The difference between **to see**, **to look at** and **to watch** explains why, only then in the end, I noticed his limp.)

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