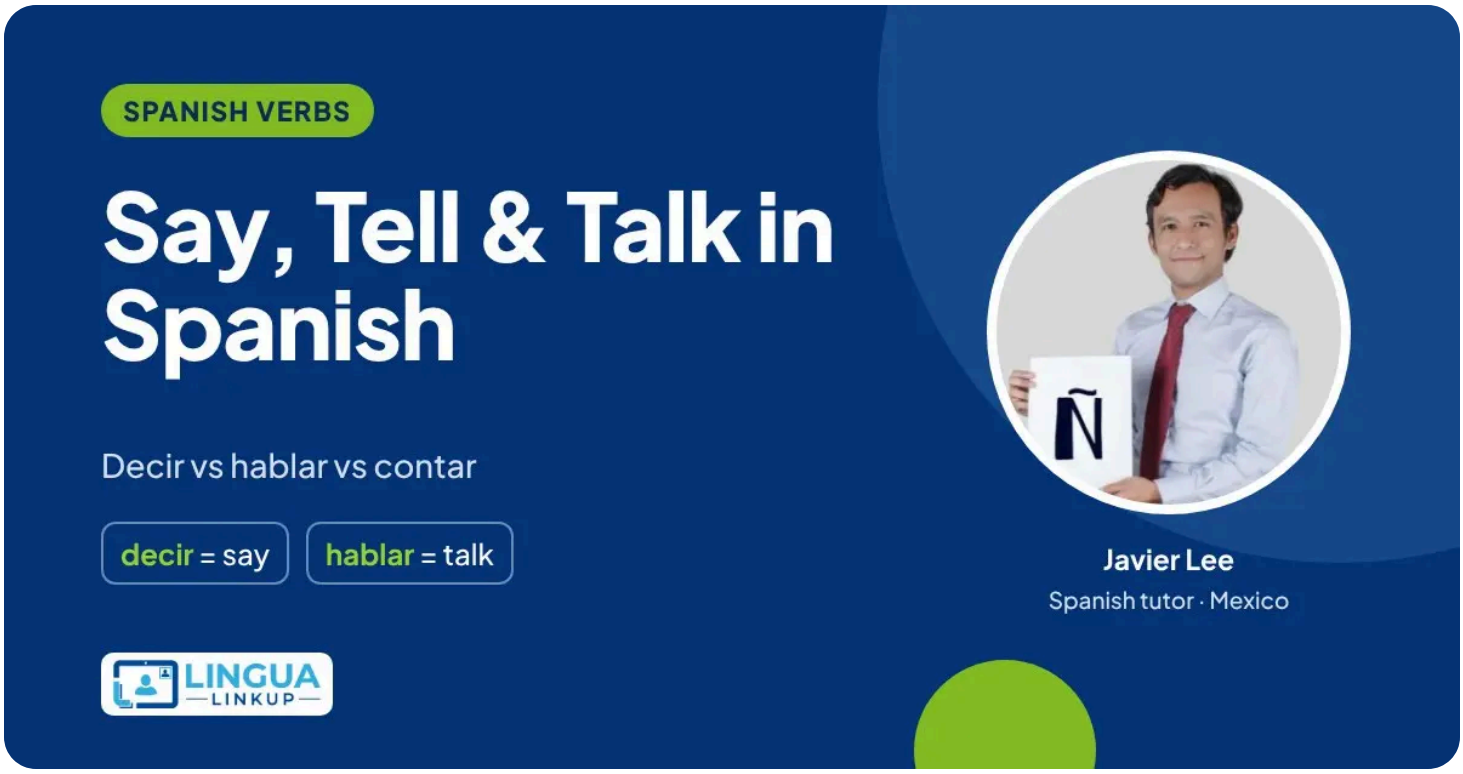
# Say, Tell and Talk in Spanish: Decir vs Hablar vs Contar

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**Quick answer: Decir** means "to say" or "to tell" (*Dice que viene* – He says he's coming). **Hablar** means "to talk" or "to speak" (*Hablo español* – I speak Spanish). **Contar** means "to tell" a story or news, and also "to count" (*Te cuento un secreto* – I'll tell you a secret).

English has four verbs here (say, tell, talk, speak) and Spanish has three main ones that don't line up neatly. This guide shows exactly when to use decir, hablar and contar, how

to conjugate them, and the phrases you'll use every day, like "How do you say…?", "Tell me" and "Can we talk?" There's a short quiz at the end.

## Say, tell, talk and speak in Spanish: the short version

| English | Spanish | Example |
|---|---|---|
| to say | **decir** | *¿Qué dijiste?* – What did you say? |
| to tell (someone something) | **decir** | *Dime la verdad.* – Tell me the truth. |
| to tell (a story, news, a joke) | **contar** | *Cuéntame qué pasó.* – Tell me what happened. |
| to talk | **hablar** | *Tenemos que hablar.* – We need to talk. |
| to speak (a language) | **hablar** | *¿Hablas inglés?* – Do you speak English? |
| to count | **contar** | *Cuenta hasta diez.* – Count to ten. |

## Decir: to say and to tell

**Decir** is about *the words* someone says. Use it for quotes, reported speech, instructions and short pieces of information.

- *Ella dice que está cansada.* – She says she's tired.
- *Mi jefe me dijo que llegara temprano.* – My boss told me to arrive early.
- *¿Cómo se dice "window" en español?* – How do you say "window" in Spanish?
- *No digas nada.* – Don't say anything.

### Decir conjugation (very irregular)

| Pronoun | Present | Preterite (past) | Command |
|---|---|---|---|

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| yo | digo | dije | – |
| tú | dices | dijiste | ¡di! |
| él / ella / usted | dice | dijo | ¡diga! |
| nosotros | decimos | dijimos | ¡digamos! |
| vosotros | decís | dijisteis | ¡decid! |
| ellos / ustedes | dicen | dijeron | ¡digan! |

The past participle is **dicho** (*Ya te lo he dicho* – I've already told you). See our full **decir conjugation guide** for every tense.

## Hablar: to talk and to speak

**Hablar** is about the act of talking, not the exact words. Use it for conversations, languages, and talking *about* or *with* someone.

- *Hablamos por teléfono anoche.* – We talked on the phone last night.
- *¿De qué hablaron en la reunión?* – What did you talk about in the meeting?
- *Quiero hablar con el gerente.* – I want to speak with the manager.
- *Mi hija habla tres idiomas.* – My daughter speaks three languages.

Hablar is a regular -ar verb: *hablo, hablas, habla, hablamos, habláis, hablan* (preterite: *hablé, hablaste, habló…*).

## Contar: to tell a story (and to count)

**Contar** means to tell or recount something with a beginning and an end: a story, a joke, news, what happened, a secret. It also means "to count."

- *Mi abuelo nos contaba cuentos.* – My grandpa used to tell us stories.
- *¿Te cuento un chiste?* – Shall I tell you a joke?
- *¡Cuéntame todo!* – Tell me everything!
- *Cuenta el dinero, por favor.* – Count the money, please.
- *Contar con alguien* – to count on someone (*Puedes contar conmigo*)

## Contar conjugation (stem change o → ue)

| Pronoun | Present | Preterite (past) |
|---|---|---|
| yo | cuento | conté |
| tú | cuentas | contaste |
| él / ella / usted | cuenta | contó |
| nosotros | contamos | contamos |
| vosotros | contáis | contasteis |
| ellos / ustedes | cuentan | contaron |

More forms and examples are in our contar conjugation guide.

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## Decir vs hablar vs contar: how to choose

| Ask yourself… | Use | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Am I reporting the words someone said? | **decir** | *Dijo que no.* – He said no. |
| Am I telling someone a fact or an instruction? | **decir** | *Dile que llame.* – Tell her to call. |
| Am I telling a story or what happened? | **contar** | *Te cuento lo del viaje.* – I'll tell you about the trip. |
| Am I having a conversation or speaking a language? | **hablar** | *Hablamos mañana.* – We'll talk tomorrow. |

Notice that *decir* usually has an object (what is said), while *hablar* often doesn't: *Hablamos mucho* (We talked a lot) is complete, but *Dijimos mucho* sounds unfinished.

## Everyday phrases

- **¿Cómo se dice…?** – How do you say…?
- **¿Qué quiere decir…?** – What does … mean?
- **Es decir…** – In other words… / That is…
- **¿Diga? / ¿Bueno?** – Hello? (answering the phone in Spain / Mexico)
- **¿Puedo hablar con…?** – Can I speak with…?
- **Hablando de…** – Speaking of…
- **Ni hablar.** – No way. / Out of the question.
- **¿Qué me cuentas?** – What's new? (literally "What do you tell me?")
- **Cuéntamelo todo.** – Tell me all about it.

## Common mistakes

- × **Ella habló que viene** → ✓ **Ella dijo que viene.** Use decir to report words.
- × **Dime una historia** → ✓ **Cuéntame una historia.** Stories are told with contar.
- × **Yo dico** → ✓ **Yo digo.** Decir is irregular in the yo form.
- × **Yo decí** → ✓ **Yo dije.** The preterite stem is *dij-*.
- × **Hablo a mi mamá** → ✓ **Hablo con mi mamá.** You talk *with* (con) someone.

## Quick quiz: decir, hablar or contar?

Choose the right verb and conjugate it.

1. ¿Tú _____ (speak) francés?
2. Ayer mi hermano me _____ (said) que se va a casar.
3. Abuela, ¿nos _____ (tell) un cuento?
4. Necesito _____ (talk) con el doctor.
5. ¿Cómo se _____ (say) “thank you” en español?

▼ **Show answers**

1. hablas
2. dijo
3. cuentas
4. hablar
5. dice

## Keep practicing

Next up: entender vs comprender, traer vs llevar and saber vs conocer. Or practice real conversation with a tutor, where you’ll use all three verbs in the first five minutes.

## Frequently asked questions

### What is the difference between decir and hablar?

Decir is about the words someone says (to say, to tell). Hablar is about the act of talking or speaking a language. Dijo que sí – He said yes. Hablamos una hora – We talked for an hour.

### How do you say “tell me” in Spanish?

Dime for short information (Dime la hora – Tell me the time) and cuéntame for a story or news (Cuéntame qué pasó – Tell me what happened).

### What does “decir” mean in English?

Decir means “to say” or “to tell.” It’s one of the most irregular Spanish verbs: digo, dices, dice; preterite dije, dijiste, dijo.

### Does contar mean to count or to tell?

Both. Contar means “to count” (Cuenta hasta diez) and “to tell” a story or news (Te cuento un secreto). Contar con means “to count on.”

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