

Said Is Dead vs. Only Use Said

The Source

Two completely opposite rules that both claim authority!

"Said is dead" comes from creative writing teaching that encourages vocabulary expansion - don't repeat "said" constantly, use "exclaimed," "whispered," "shouted," etc.

"Only use 'said'" comes from Elmore Leonard and others who argued dialogue tags should be invisible. Fancy tags draw attention away from dialogue. Leonard wanted readers focused on what's said, not how it's said.

Both approaches have legitimate foundations. Elementary teachers notice young writers overusing "said" and teach synonym awareness. Professional writers notice fancy tags becoming distracting and teach invisibility.

The Morph

Each became absolute. Elementary teachers drill "said is dead" into kids. Workshop leaders demand "only said" from adults. Both camps claim moral superiority.

The morphing created two opposite extremes:

1. "He ejaculated" becomes acceptable because "said is dead"

2. OR "whispered," "shouted," "asked" all become prohibited because "only 'said'"
3. Writers get caught between contradictory prohibitions
4. Natural dialogue tagging becomes paralyzed by rules

The Reality

Context and rhythm dictate. Sometimes "said" is perfect invisibility. Sometimes "whispered" conveys essential information economically. Sometimes the tag itself doesn't matter because the dialogue is strong enough. "Get out," works without any tag if context is clear.

Good writers use the full range: said, asked, replied, whispered, shouted - whatever serves rhythm and clarity. Dickens used elaborate tags. Hemingway used mostly "said." Both approaches work.

Different genres have different conventions:

- Literary fiction often uses mostly "said" for invisibility
- Romance may use more varied tags for emotional texture
- Children's books use varied tags for vocabulary building
- Genre fiction varies by author and style

What Works

"Said" works when:

1. You want tags to be invisible

2. The dialogue itself conveys tone
3. Rhythm benefits from simple, repeated tag
4. The manner of speaking is obvious from context

Varied tags work when:

1. They convey essential information economically: "whispered," "shouted"
2. Rhythm needs variety
3. The verb itself adds meaning: "interrupted," "continued," "agreed"
4. Genre conventions expect them

No tag works when:

1. Context makes speaker obvious
2. Action beats replace tags: "She slammed the door. 'Get out.'"
3. Two-person dialogue is clear without constant attribution

What Fails

Fancy tags fail when:

1. They become purple: "he ejaculated," "she articulated"
2. They do the dialogue's work: "said angrily" when dialogue should show anger

3. They draw attention to themselves
4. They pile up Tom Swiftly: "said swiftly," "said sweetly"

Only "said" fails when:

1. Essential information gets lost: "whispered" vs. "said"
2. Rhythm becomes monotonous
3. Natural variety is sacrificed to rigid rule
4. Verbs like "asked," "replied" would be more natural

The Actual Principle

Use dialogue tags that serve rhythm and clarity without drawing attention to themselves. Default to "said" and "asked" for invisibility. Use "whispered," "shouted," "muttered" when they provide essential information. Avoid fancy tags that do the dialogue's work or call attention to themselves. Let strong dialogue carry its own tone.

Or more simply: Use the tag that serves the dialogue best, without drawing focus from what's said.

Why This Corruption Matters

This corruption is damaging because:

1. Two opposite rules create paralysis
2. Writers obsess over tags instead of strengthening dialogue

3. Natural ear for rhythm gets overridden by rules
4. The focus shifts from dialogue quality to tag selection
5. Elementary teaching conflicts with professional practice

The real principle - serve the dialogue - gets lost in warring prohibitions. Tags should be chosen by ear, rhythm, and function, not by absolute rule.