Tail vs. Tale

The words tail and tale are part of a group of words called homophones, which have similar sounds but have different meanings, uses, or spellings. This sometimes causes confusion among writers which lead them to interchange the two terms. This post will help you identify the differences between the two and enable you to use them correctly in your writing.

The word tail is most commonly used as a noun pertaining to "the rear end or a process or prolongation of the rear end of the body of an animal" or "something resembling an animal's tail in shape or position."

> NASA'S Maven Mission Finds Mars Has a Twisted Tail
> Astrobiology Magazine

> 'Like running a marathon – with 100 sharks on your tail': behind the scenes of Blue Planet II
> The Guardian

> Bandit-Masked Dinosaur With Striped Tail Evolved to Escape Tyrannosaurs
> Seeker

However, it may also be used as a verb meaning "to follow for purposes of surveillance" or "to connect end to end."

> Lenexa Police release video of technique where thieves tail bank customers leaving ATM
> Fox4KC

> "They pull out of the station's driveway and tail the car onto nearby Griffiths Road, in the Newcastle suburb of Lambton, before they turn on their lights and sirens and the Camry is calmly pulled over without incident."
> The Sydney Morning Herald

> Construction worker who tailed thieves defends car chase, apologizes to injured boy
> CTV News

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Meanwhile, the term tale is used as a noun referring to "a usually imaginative narrative of an event" or "an intentionally untrue report."

A Tale Of Two Efforts To Improve Confidence In U.S. Elections
NPR

Commentary: Putin spins a tale of Russian humiliation
Chicago Tribune

As ice retreats, frozen mosses emerge to tell climate change tale
Science News

Now that we've discussed the different uses and meanings of tail and tale, you should be able to distinguish between the two and use them correctly in your sentences. Remember that tail is either an animal part of to follow while tale pertains to a story or narrative.