

Tenses

Verb tenses show when an action took place, as well as how long it occurred. The main verb tenses are the past, present, and future.

The past, present, and future are the central divisions of time in English. The present represents actions happening now, while the past represents actions that happened earlier, and the future describes actions that will happen later.

Simple tense

The simple tense is a grammatical aspect that refers to the normal forms of the past, present, and future tenses—nothing fancy! Unlike the other aspects, it doesn't add any new information. True to its name, simple tenses are the easiest to form and have the fewest rules.

Perfect tense

The definition of the perfect tense is a little more complicated. It's used for actions that relate to other points in time, either completed or ongoing.

For example, in the sentence I have played soccer since I was a child, the perfect tense indicates that the action occurred continuously in the past and still happens in the present. By contrast, in the sentence I played soccer when I was a child, the simple past tense indicates that the action occurred only in the past, and has no relation to the present.

The perfect tenses use a conjugation of the auxiliary verb have with the past participle of the main verb.

Continuous tense

We use the continuous tenses (also known as the progressive tenses) for ongoing actions or actions that happen a while before completion. For example, They are studying all night means the studying lasts many hours before it's finished.

Past tenses

Simple past

We use the simple past to show actions completed in the past, with no extra emphasis.

For regular verbs, you form the simple past tense by adding the suffix –ed to the end of the verb (or just –d if the past tense verb already ends in an e).

Be careful of irregular past tense verbs, however. These don't follow the normal rules and use their own unique forms for the past tense. For example, the past tense of the irregular verb go is went.

Regular verbs: I picked up the glass, but it dropped from my hand.

Irregular verbs: This morning I went to the store, but I forgot the milk.

Past perfect

[had] + [past participle]

What if you're talking about two different actions in the past and want to show that one happened before the other? The past perfect, also known as the pluperfect, shows that one past action happened earlier than another one.

She had arrived at the office before she realized it was Sunday.

I ran to my car when I noticed my wife had left already.

Past continuous

[was/were] + [present participle]

Use the past continuous to show an ongoing action in the past, especially if the action was interrupted by another action. It's also used for habitual actions that occurred in the past but not in the present. It's usually used with adverbs like always or adverb phrases like all the time.

My dog was whimpering in his sleep when the TV woke him up.

Present tenses

Simple present

The simple present is the most basic of the English tenses. It's used for individual actions or habitual actions in the present.

Often the simple present is just the root verb with no changes or additions. The main exception to this is when the subject is third person and singular. In this case you add the suffix *-s*. If the verb ends in *o*, *ch*, *sh*, *th*, *ss*, *gh*, or *z*, you add *-es*. If the verb ends in a consonant and *y* (and the subject is third-person singular), drop the *y* and add *-ies*.

Today I feel like a million bucks!

My brother carries the groceries while my sister stays on the couch.

Present perfect

[have/has] + [past participle]

Although it's quite common, the present perfect is one of the most difficult English verb tenses. It is used to describe a few different types of actions, including:

- an ongoing action started in the past that is not yet completed
- the same action completed multiple times in the past and likely to be completed again
- an action completed very recently (usually with just or now)
- an uncompleted action that is expected to be finished (in the negative)

Additionally, the present perfect can be used to emphasize the significance of a completed action, especially one that happened over time.

We have tricked him every April Fool's Day since we were kids.

My niece has grown so much this year!

Present continuous

[am/is/are] + [present participle]

Use the present continuous to show an action happening right now or in the near future.

I am reading The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy for the fifth time!

We are eating pizza tonight.

Present perfect continuous

[have/has] + [been] + [present participle]

The present perfect continuous shows an ongoing action in the present that was started in the past. It is often used to emphasize the length of time.

We have been waiting for over an hour!

The team has been practicing nonstop for the tournament.

Future tenses

Simple future

Use the simple future for actions that have not happened yet but will later. To form the simple future, just place the modal verb will before the root form of the main verb. (Note that if the action will happen in the near future, you can use the present continuous instead.)

She will be president one day.

I will not go to the wedding without a date!

Future perfect

[will] + [have] + [past participle]

The future perfect shows an action that will be completed in the future by a specified time. Because it depends on another time, the future perfect is often used with words like by, before, at, or when.

By the time you read this, I will have already left.

She will have eaten lunch before her sister even wakes up.

Future continuous

[will] + [be] + [present participle]

Use the future continuous tense for future actions happening over a period of time, especially when a specific time is mentioned. The future continuous tense also shows more certainty and likelihood than the simple future.

By this time tomorrow, I will be drinking margaritas on the beach.

We will be attending a meeting from noon until 3 p.m.