

English Verb Tenses

Purpose of Document

- Provide the necessary background knowledge to learn and apply the 12 verb tenses: verbs, tense, aspect, participles, and auxiliary verbs.
- Define the purpose of each aspect and verb tense.
- Describe the syntactic formation of each verb tense.
- Provide examples & explanations of each verb tense.
- Each verb tense has an active and passive voice. Only the active voice is used in this document to present and discuss the tenses.

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Background Knowledge

Verbs are words that express an action, event, occurrence, or state of being. Verbs feature tense and aspect, which describe when and how a verb expresses and extends itself across time.

English has 12 primary verb tenses, which are formed by combining **tenses** and **aspects**:

1. **Simple Past**
2. **Simple Present**
3. **Simple Future**
4. **Past Progressive**
5. **Present Progressive**
6. **Future Progressive**
7. **Past Perfect**
8. **Present Perfect**
9. **Future Perfect**
10. **Present Perfect Progressive**
11. **Past Perfect Progressive**
12. **Future Perfect Progressive**

Tense

Tense primarily expresses **when** a verb occurs: in the past, present, or future. Tense is expressed via inflections to verbs (e.g., *-ed*) and auxiliary verbs (e.g., *will*).

English has three simple tenses:

- **Past** (e.g., I talked; you ate.)
- **Present** (e.g., I talk; you eat.)
- **Future** (e.g., I will talk; you will eat.)

Aspect

Aspect refers to **how** a verb extends through time, such as duration, progression, completion, or repetition. It's a way of providing more nuance and detail about a verb, and it is expressed via past participles (e.g., *eaten*), present participles (e.g., *eating*), and auxiliary verbs (e.g., *will, been, has, have, had*).

English has four aspects:

- **Simple**
 - Expresses actions or states as facts, habits, or generalizations.
- **Progressive**
 - Expresses actions or states as ongoing at a moment in time.
- **Perfect**
 - Expresses actions or states that begin at one moment in time and reach completion at another moment in time.
- **Perfect Progressive**
 - Expresses actions or states that are ongoing at one moment in time and reach completion or continue into another moment in time.

Participles

Each verb in English can take several forms, called its paradigm. For example, here are the forms for the verb *to eat*: *eat*, *eats*, *ate*, *eaten*, *eating*. Participles are the last two forms (i.e., *eaten*, *eating*), of which there are two types: present and past. They are used to form most of the verb tenses.

For context: A verb's **bare/base form** is its uninflected form (i.e., it has no endings like *-ed* or *-s*). For example, *eat* is the bare form of the verb *to eat*. And *to eat* is called the verb's **infinitive form** because it has the particle *to* before it.

Present Participles

Present participles (aka progressive participles) are formed by adding the inflection ***-ing*** to the end of the main verb.

For example: *eat* → *eating*

Other examples of present participles: *singing*, *ringing*, *doing*, *coming*, *taking*, *sliding*, *laughing*, *tearing*, *burning*.

Past Participles

Past participles (aka passive participles) are usually formed by adding the inflection ***-ed*** to the end of the main verb's base form, but sometimes the ending differs depending on the verb. Other endings include ***-en***, ***-ne***, ***-n***. Additionally, the spelling of the verb might change.

For example: *bake* → *baked*; *eat* → *eaten*; *win* → *won*.

Other examples of past participles: *sung*, *rung*, *done*, *come*, *taken*, *slid*, *laughed*, *torn*, *burnt*.

A verb's past participle form is less straightforward than the present participle: This is because some verbs' past tense and past participle forms are identical while others only change an internal vowel. Simply check a dictionary to confirm a verb's form for the past participle.

Auxiliary Verbs

Auxiliary verbs are supplemental verbs that help express the tense and aspect of a main verb. That's why they are also known as *helping verbs*. They always position themselves before the main verb. And each main verb can have one or more auxiliary verbs. (Other words and phrases can insert themselves between auxiliary and main verbs; this is especially true for adverbs.)

Examples of auxiliary verbs: *must, could, shall, do, am, was, were, will, might, been, be*.

The following auxiliary verbs are important for forming verb tenses:

- **to be (am, is, are, was, were, be, been, being)**
- **to have (has, have, had)**
- **will/shall**

Simple Tenses

The **simple aspect** expresses actions or states as facts, habits, or generalizations.

The **simple tenses** generally express actions or states that occur in a single moment in time: in a past moment, a present moment, or a future moment.

These tenses convey generalizations, facts, or habits about actions or states that occur within the past, present, or future. To determine whether the verb is expressed as a fact or habitual occurrence, use contextual evidence based on other phrases in the sentence.

The following tenses use the ordinary aspect:

- **Simple Past**
- **Simple Present**
- **Simple Future**

The following types of items are needed to form the simple tenses:

- For the Past: **-ed inflection on the end of the main verb's bare form**
- For the Present: **bare form of the main verb (sometimes inflected with -s)**
- For the Future: **the auxiliary verb *will* and the bare form of the main verb**

Simple Past

The **simple past** describes actions or states that start and end in the past. Or it may describe actions or states that habitually or consistently occurred in the past.

To determine if the past action or state occurred either as single instance or habitually, look for context clues, such as other words and phrases in the sentence.

To form the simple past:

- **Add the -ed inflection to the bare form of the main verb. (plant → planted)**

OR

- **If the main verb is irregular, the spelling of the verb will change. (win → won)**

Most verbs add an *-ed* to form the simple past tense (e.g., *talk* → *talked*), but some of the most common verbs in English are irregular (e.g., *to eat*) and change their internal vowel sound to express the past tense, which has consequences on its spelling (e.g., *eat* → *ate*; *teach* → *taught*).

Simple Past Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the simple past and an explanation of their usage.

1. I **visited** my friend yesterday.
 - a. In other words, the speaker visited their friend in the past. The word *yesterday* provides context that the speaker started and completed the action but does not indicate habituality or frequency.
2. My dad **built** computers at his first job.
 - a. In other words, the dad *used* to build computers in the past. The phrase *at his first job* provides context that the action occurred regularly in the past.

Simple Present

The **simple present** describes habitual or regular actions or states that consistently occur throughout time. Or it may describe current facts, information, or general statements.

Contextual clues such as words and phrases in a sentence provide evidence that an action or state is a regular occurrence. These often include words and phrases of time (e.g., *on Wednesdays*).

Ironically, the simple present does not usually express actions or states that are actively occurring in the present, as it would sound awkward. For example, to say that you are currently eating a sandwich, we normally would not say *I eat a sandwich*; rather, we would use the present progressive tense (discussed later): *I am eating a sandwich*.

To form the simple present:

- **Use the bare form of the main verb. (e.g., eat, sit, smile, practice)**
- **If the main verb refers to a 3rd person singular noun, add the inflection -s to the ending to the bare form of the main verb. (e.g., he eats; she sits; it smiles; the student practices)**

Some simple present tense verbs inflect with an **-s** on the end. This is true when the verb refers to a noun that is in the **third person singular**: *she, he, it*, or any other word that is used to talk about a singular third-party person, thing, or idea (e.g., *a police officer, the mailbox, bravery*). The third person contrasts the first person (*I, me, my, we, us, our*) and the second person (*you, your, yours*). The irregular verbs *to be*, *to do*, and *to have* are among the most common exceptions to the -s rule, as they have their own set of forms.

Simple Present Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the simple present and an explanation of their usage.

1. Coworkers often **collaborate** on projects.
 - a. In other words, coworkers regularly collaborate on projects. The word *often* provides further context and confirmation that the act of collaborating is a habitual occurrence.
 - b. This is a regularly occurring event because the verb *collaborate* is in the simple present and not the present progressive. The use of the present progressive would indicate that the collaboration is actively occurring in the present moment.
2. Gigi **manages** the office on Tuesdays.
 - a. In other words, Gigi manages the office on a regular basis. The phrase *on Tuesdays* provides further context and confirmation that Gigi consistently manages the office on Tuesdays.
 - b. This is a regularly occurring event because the verb *manages* is in the simple present and not the present progressive. The use of the present progressive would indicate that the *manages* is actively occurring in the present moment.
 - c. Note that *manages* has the inflection -s on the end because *Gigi* is a third person singular noun.

Simple Future

The **simple future** describes actions or states that will happen or start in the future.

To form the simple future, use one of these combinations:

- **will + bare form of the main verb**
- OR**
- **am/is/are + going + infinitive form of the verb (e.g., *to eat*)**

The *will + bare form of the main verb* is the traditional and most formal construction of the simple future tense. It generally refers to events that were only recently decided to occur in the future; these might be impulsive, spontaneous, or unplanned actions.

The second combination usually communicates the same idea: that an action or state will occur in the future, but it generally refers to events that have already been planned in advance for the future; these might be actions based on previous evidence, plans, or other information. It's also a less formal construction. Furthermore, the choice of *am/is/are* is based on the subject of the verb.

Simple Future Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the simple future and an explanation of their usage.

1. The data scientist **will input** the data tomorrow morning.
 - a. In other words, the data scientist will input some data in the future (i.e., *tomorrow*).
 - b. The use of *will* instead of *is going to* may indicate that this future event was only recently decided.
2. Mrs. Barker **is going to teach** her class about metaphors next week.
 - a. In other words, Mrs. Baker will teach her class about metaphors in the future (i.e., *next week*).
 - b. The use of *is going to teach* instead of *will teach* may indicate that Mrs. Baker planned well ahead of time that she will teach her class about metaphors.

Progressive Tenses

The **progressive aspect** expresses actions or states as ongoing at a moment in time.

The **progressive tenses** express actions or states that are ongoing within the past, present, or future.

These tenses convey a sense of continuity, progression, or duration within the timeframe of the past, present, or future.

The following tenses use the progressive aspect:

- **Past Progressive**
- **Present Progressive**
- **Future Progressive**

The following types of items are needed to form the progressive tenses:

- **Auxiliary Verbs (e.g., *be/am/is/was/were/are* and *will*)**
- **Present Participle of the Main Verb**

Past Progressive

The **past progressive** describes an action or state that was ongoing in the past. In other words, an action started in the past and continued up until another time in the past.

Unlike the simple past, this tense is used to emphasize the progression and duration of a verb, from one point in the past to another point in the past.

A past progressive verb may be in the context of the word *while* and another verb in the simple past or past progressive; this is to show a parallel or intersection between two actions.

To form the past progressive, use this combination:

- **was/were + the present participle of the main verb**

Past Progressive Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the past progressive and an explanation of their usage.

1. My friend **was texting** throughout the entire class.
 - a. In other words, the friend began texting at the beginning of class and continued texting through to the end of class.

- b. The sentence could have instead read as *My friend texted throughout the class*, but the use of the past progressive emphasizes the duration of the action.
2. Alex **was revising** his digital art while Yukun **was baking** some cake.
 - a. In other words, Alex revised digital art while Yukun baked a cake; these actions are simultaneous and occur for an unspecified duration in the past.
 - b. The sentence could have instead used the simple past, but the use of the past progressive emphasizes the parallel, ongoing nature of the two actions throughout the past.

Present Progressive

The **present progressive** describes an action or state that is ongoing in the present moment. In other words, an action is currently happening in real time.

Unlike the simple present, this tense does not express a habitual nature or generalization about regular or consistent actions. Its primary purpose is expressing verbs occurring at this very moment. On some occasions, this tense expresses an action that will occur very soon in the future.

To form the present progressive, use this combination:

- **am/is/are + the present participle of the main verb**

Present Progressive Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the present progressive and an explanation of their usage.

1. The scouts **are chopping** wood in the forest.
 - a. In other words, the scouts are actively, in this present moment, chopping wood in the forest.
2. I **am going** home tomorrow.
 - a. In other words, in the very near future (i.e., *tomorrow*) the speaker is heading home.

- b. This is a use of the present progressive expressing an action that will occur very soon.

Future Progressive

The **future progressive** describes an action or state that will be ongoing in the future. In other words, an action will start in the future and continue for some duration into the future.

Unlike the simple future, this tense emphasizes the ongoing nature and duration of a verb in the future; it's more precise than the simple future because it narrows the timeframe.

This tense may also emphasize an action that will be occurring between two specified points in the future.

To form the future progressive, use one of these combinations:

- **will + be + the present participle of the main verb**

OR

- **am/is/are + going to be + the present participle of the main verb**

Future Progressive Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the future progressive and an explanation of their usage.

1. The cook **will be preparing** the kitchen while the waiters are in a meeting.
 - a. In other words, the act of *preparing* will occur throughout the meeting.
 - b. The future progressive emphasizes the continuity and duration of the *preparing*: the action will start in the future and continue for a specified time during in the future.
2. They **are going to be sitting** next to be during the whole ceremony.
 - a. In other words, a group of people will sit next to the speaker throughout the entire ceremony.
 - b. The future progressive emphasizes the continuity and duration of the *sitting*: the action will start in the future and continue for a specified time during the future.

Perfect Tenses

The word *perfect* originates from the Latin “perfectus,” which means “completed” or “finished.” In this sense, the verbs using the perfect aspect are complete and whole—not ongoing.

The **perfect aspect** expresses actions or states that begin at one moment in time and reach completion in another moment in time.

The **perfect tenses** express actions or states that begin in the past, present, or future and reach completion at another moment in the past, present, or future. In other words, an action begins at one time but reaches completion at or before a second time.

These tenses convey a sense of completion about actions or states that span across the timeframes of the past, present, and future.

The following tenses use the perfect aspect:

- **Past Perfect**
- **Present Perfect**
- **Future Perfect**

Two types of items are needed to form the perfect tenses:

- **Auxiliary Verbs (e.g., *has/have/had* and *will*)**
- **Past Participle of the Main Verb**

Past Perfect

The **past perfect** describes a completed action or state that occurred before another action or state. In other words, the past perfect action occurred first and precedes a second action that is also in the past.

Typically, that second past action or state is specified or implied within the context of the past perfect verb—whether in the same sentence or a different one; the second past action also chronologically occurs after the past perfect verb and is typically expressed in the simple past tense.

Contextual clues that indicate the use of the past perfect include words and phrases like *before*, *when*, *by the time*.

To form the past perfect, combine these two elements:

had + past participle of the main verb

Past Perfect Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the past perfect and an explanation of their usage.

1. I **had eaten** my dinner before I went to the shop.
 - a. In other words, the speaker ate his dinner at some point in the past, and then he went to the shop at a second point in the past.
 - b. The first verb phrase *had eaten* is in the past perfect.
 - c. The second verb phrase *went* is in the simple past.
 - d. The word *before* indicates a second past event and the use of the past perfect.
2. By the time the captain arrived, the passengers **had** already **boarded** the plane.
 - a. In other words, the passengers finished boarding the plane at some point in the past, and then the captain arrived sometime afterward at a second point in the past.
 - b. The first verb phrase *arrived* is in the simple past and is the second past event.
 - c. The second verb phrase *had boarded* is in the past perfect and is the first past event.
 - d. The elements *already* and *by the time* indicate a second past event and the use of the past perfect.

Present Perfect

The **present perfect** describes:

- an action or state that started in the past and reaches completion in the present.
- an action or state that started in the past and continues into the present.
- a completed action or state that has consequences or effects that continue into the present.

In other words, the present perfect expresses a verb that starts in the past, but ends in, continues into, or has effects on the present.

Contextual clues that indicate the use of the present perfect include the words *for* and *since*.

To form the present perfect, combine these two elements:

have/has + past participle of the main verb

The use of *has* or *have* depends on the subject of the verb. Use *has* for a third person singular noun or pronoun (e.g., *she*, *he*, *it*, *doctor*), and use *have* for all other instances.

Present Perfect Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the present perfect and an explanation of their usage.

1. I **have updated** the spreadsheets.
 - a. In other words, the speaker started updating the spreadsheets at some point in the past, and now she has finished in this present moment.
 - b. In this example, the act of updating reaches completion in the present.
2. Diane **has worked** as a project manager for ten years.
 - a. In other words, the Diane started working as a project manager ten years ago and continues to be a project manager in the present moment.
 - b. In this example, the act of working as a project manager continues as an ongoing and present action.
 - c. The phrase *for ten years* also serves as contextual evidence for the use of the present perfect.

Future Perfect

The **future perfect** describes an action or state that will reach completion by a specific time in the future.

Occasionally, another second future action or state is specified or implied within the context of the future perfect verb—whether in the same sentence or a different one; the second future action or state is typically expressed the simple present tense.

Contextual clues that indicate the use of the future perfect include the phrase *by the time*.

To form the future perfect, combine these three elements:

will/shall + have + past participle of the main verb

Future Perfect Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the future perfect and an explanation of their usage.

1. Sandy **will have arrived** home by the time Michael departs school.
 - a. In other words, Sandy will arrive home at some point in the future, but she will arrive before Michael departs for school.
 - b. The first verb phrase *will have arrived* is in the future perfect and is the first future event.
 - c. The second verb phrase *departs* is in the simple present and refers to the second future event.
 - d. The phrase *by the time* indicates the use of the future perfect tense.
2. The president **will have signed** the treaty before the ambassador leaves.
 - a. In other words, the president will sign the treaty at some point in the future, but he will sign it before the ambassador leaves.
 - b. The first verb phrase *will have signed* is in the future perfect and is the first future event.
 - c. The second verb phrase *leaves* is in the simple present and is the second future event.

Perfect Progressive Tenses

The **perfect progressive aspect** expresses actions or states that are ongoing at one moment in time and reach completion or continue into another moment in time. They are a combination of the perfect and progressive aspects.

The **perfect progressive tenses** express actions or states that are ongoing in the past, present, or future, but they reach completion or continue into another time within the past, present, or future.

These tenses convey a sense of both duration and completion for ongoing actions or states of being that span across the timeframes of the present, past, or future.

The following tenses use the perfect progressive aspect:

- **Past Perfect Progressive**
- **Present Perfect Progressive**
- **Future Perfect Progressive**

Two types of items are needed to form the perfect progressive tenses:

- **Auxiliary Verbs (e.g., *has/have/had, will, and been*)**
- **Present Participle of the Main Verb**

Past Perfect Progressive

The **past perfect progressive** tense describes an action or state that started in the past and ended at another time in the past. In other words, a verb starts in the past, continues through the past, and ends at a second point in the past (i.e., reaches completion).

Unlike the past perfect, this tense emphasizes the habitual or ongoing nature of the past action.

Typically, the second point in the past is expressed as an action or state, and it is usually specified or implied within the context of the past perfect progressive verb—whether in the same sentence or a different one; the second verb also chronologically occurs after the past perfect progressive verb and is normally expressed in the simple past tense.

Typical signal words for this tense include *when, before, since, and for*.

To form the past perfect progressive, combine these three elements:

had + been + present participle of the main verb

Past Perfect Progressive Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the past perfect progressive and an explanation of their usage.

1. My sister **had been studying** for eight hours before my mom told her to come downstairs for dinner.
 - a. In other words, the sister started studying at some point in the past and did not finish studying until her mom asked her to come downstairs for dinner.
 - b. The first verb phrase *had been studying* is in the past perfect progressive and is the first past event that was ongoing until the second past event.
 - c. The second verb phrase *told* is in the past simple past tense and is the second past event. Both this verb and the word *before* indicate the use of the past perfect progressive.
 - d. The phrase *for eight hours* indicates the ongoing nature of the act of *studying*.
2. The author **had been writing** books for fifty years before he died.
 - a. In other words, the author started writing at some point in the past until the second point in the past in which he died.
 - b. The first verb phrase *had been writing* is in the past perfect progressive and is the first past event that was ongoing until the second past event.
 - c. The second verb phrase *died* is in the simple past and is the second past event. Both this verb and the word *before* indicate the use of the past perfect progressive.
 - d. The phrase *for fifty years* indicates the ongoing nature of the act of *writing*.

Present Perfect Progressive

The **present perfect progressive** tense describes an action or state that starts in the past and continues into the present.

Unlike the present perfect, this tense emphasizes the ongoing or habitual nature of an action that starts in the past and continues into the present.

The words *lately* and *recently* are common signals for this tense.

To form the present perfect progressive, combine these three elements:

have/has + been + present participle of the main verb

Present Perfect Progressive Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the present perfect progressive and an explanation of their usage.

1. The manager **has been waiting** for the candidate for over an hour.
 - a. In other words, the manager started waiting for the candidate at some point in the past and is still waiting for the candidate into the present moment.
 - b. The phrase *for over an hour* indicates the ongoing nature of the act of *waiting*.
2. Lately, we **have been practicing** our coding skills.
 - a. In other words, the group started practicing its coding skills at some point in the past and continues to do so into the present moment.
 - b. The word *lately* indicates the continual or habitual nature of *practicing*.

Future Perfect Progressive

The **future perfect progressive** tense describes an action or state that starts in the past, present, or future and continues into the future. In other words, the verb may start in any timeframe and continue into the future.

Unlike the future perfect, this tense emphasizes the ongoing or habitual nature of an action that starts in any timeframe and continues into the future.

Typically, this tense is used to express an action that starts in the future and continues into or up until another time in the future. On some occasions, the action starts in the past or present and continues into or up until a time in the future; because of this, a second action or state is specified or implied within the context of the future perfect verb—whether in the same sentence or a different one.

A common signal for this tense is *by the time*.

To form the future perfect progressive, combine these four elements:

will + have/has + been + present participle of the main verb

The future perfect progressive tense is the rarest and most complex on this list. As with all tenses, other phrases and words (as well as other verb phrases/tenses) in the sentence may provide contextual insight into which tense is being used. But the easiest way to identify a verb tense is by its syntactic formation (e.g., had + past participle).

Future Perfect Progressive Examples & Explanations

Below are examples of the future perfect progressive and an explanation of their usage.

1. By this time tomorrow, the kids **will have been sleeping** for an hour.
 - a. In other words, the kids will start to sleep at some point in the future (i.e., *tomorrow*) and will have been doing so for over an hour.
 - b. The first verb phrase *will have been sleeping* is in the future perfect progressive, which starts in the future and continues into the future.
 - c. The act of *sleeping* is emphasized as an ongoing action by using the phrase *for an hour*.
 - d. The phrase *by this time tomorrow* is a signal for the future perfect progressive.
2. I **will have been living** in my home for twenty years before Paige visits me.
 - a. In other words, the speaker started to live in their home twenty years ago, and they will continue doing so through the past, present, and future—and they will not be visited until some unspecified moment in the future.
 - b. The first verb phrase *will have been living* is in the future perfect progressive, and it starts in the past and continues as an ongoing action into the future.
 - c. The act of *living* is emphasized as ongoing by using the phrase *for twenty years*.
 - d. The second verb phrase *visits* is in the simple present/implied future.