

The English Verb Tense System

Simple	Simple	Progressive	Perfect	Perfect Progressive
Past	She helped her friend yesterday.	She was helping her friend when I arrived	She had helped her friend before I arrived.	She had been helping her friend when the phone rang.
Present	She helps her friend every day	She is helping her friend now.	She has helped her friend many times before.	She has been helping her friend for two hours.
Future	She will help her friend tomorrow	She will be helping her friend when I get there.	She will have helped her friend by tomorrow.	She will have been helping her friend for a couple of hours by the time they stop.



Tense is NOT time.

Past tense verbs do not always talk about the past. The future is not always expressed using the future tense.

Time has to do with the physical world we live in.

Tense is a grammatical feature of verbs. It often expresses a time relationship. The relationship between language and the real world is not a one-to-one relationship.

My flight leaves at noon tomorrow.

Leaves is a present tense verb

Sometimes we use a past tense verb to talk about something in the present.

If I had time right now, I would help you.

***Had* is the past of *have*.**

Present tenses

Simple present

- ◆ Used for scientific facts
- ◆ Used for habitual or customary actions
- ◆ The “always” tense

The simple present tense is used for something that is always true or is a fact or habit.



The earth is round. The moon is smaller than the earth. (Facts)

I check my email twice a day. She gets up at seven. (habit)

Present progressive

- ◆ Used for actions which are in progress at the moment of speaking. Used for actions happening right now.
- ◆ Used to express annoyance with something that someone always does.

The present progressive is used for actions which are in progress at the moment of speaking (in other words, NOW)

I am writing a letter. My friend is checking his email. You are sitting at home.

Very often this **now** is a **general** now. Now could mean **this month, this week, this semester, this year.**

I am taking Grammar III online this semester.

She is going to BCC this year.

Stative verbs

English has a small group of verbs known as **stative verbs**. These verbs are unique because

- 1) they describe states rather than actions
- 2) they generally don't take progressive tense



Remember Romeo and Julie? What did Romeo say?

Did Romeo tell Juliet *I am loving you*?

No! He said *I love you*. *Love* is a stative verb.

We say *The pizza smells good* and NOT *The pizza is smelling good*.

Stative verbs come from five main categories: mental and emotional states, possession, sense perception, and a miscellaneous group.

Some verbs can have both a stative and a progressive meaning.

Consider the verb *think*. If it means *believe*, it is stative. If it means *use the brain*, it can be progressive.

I think this is a good idea. (stative)

**Wait a minute. I am still thinking about what you said.
(progressive)**

Temporary states with *am-is-are being*

In English, if I say *Mary is quiet*, the usual meaning is that Mary is a quiet person.

However, if I say *Mary is being quiet*, I mean that temporarily Mary is quiet, but she is not always this way.

If I say that *Jack is being foolish*, I don't mean that Jack is usually a foolish man. I mean that right now, temporarily, Jack is doing something that is foolish.



**Tom is usually quite serious.
At the party he had a little too much to drink.
Now Tom is being very silly!**

Note: Not all adjectives can be used this way. For example, the sentence **Prof. Freud is being tall** has no meaning.

Regular & irregular verbs

First the *bad* news: English has about 150 commonly used irregular verbs. Here's the *good* news. Most English language students know 80-90% of these already. Memorize any of the irregular verbs that you do not know thoroughly. As you learn the verbs, learn the verb forms *but* also the meanings for any of the verbs that are new to you.

Troublesome verbs: an introduction

<p>Chickens lay eggs <i>Lay</i> is a transitive verb (VT). <i>Eggs</i> is the object of lay.</p>	<p>The baby laughed and smiled. <i>Laughed</i> and <i>smiled</i> are intransitive. These verbs have no object.</p>

Transitive verbs (VT) take always take an object; intransitive verbs (VI) don't take an object.

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Troublesome verbs

There's a small group of verbs which even confuse native speakers of English. These verbs have slightly different forms depending on whether the verb is transitive or intransitive.

Here are some examples.

John sat in the chair. (VI)

Mary set the book on the chair (VT)

I raised my hand (VT)

Hot air rises (VI)

The trickiest pair is **lay** and **lie**. **Lay** means to put something down.

She is laying the pen on the desk (VT).

The little boy laid his head on his pillow (VT)

"Lie" is intransitive. I'm tired. I'm going to lie down (VI).

Now what's really challenging is this. Look at the past form of lie. It's **lay!**

You could say **He will lie down. BUT Yesterday he lay down.**

If this seems confusing to you, don't feel bad. It's confusing for Americans, too. We often get it wrong.

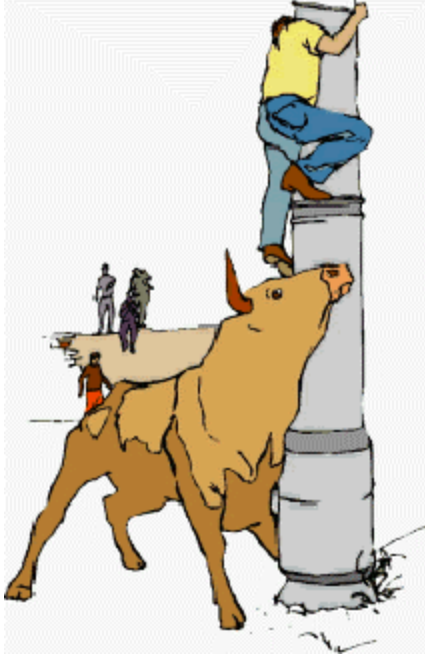
Simple past

In English, the simple past talks about an activity that **began and ended at a particular time in the past**. This is in contrast to the present perfect tense that we will go over in a few pages.

When + past, past

- ◆ **When it started to rain (1st action), I opened my umbrella (2nd action).**
- ◆ **First it started raining. Then I got a little wet.**

If a sentence has two clauses which are both in the simple past and the sentence also contains when, the when clause happened first.



I climbed the pole *when the bull attacked me.*

When the bull attacked me happened *before* I climbed the pole

I felt really scared *when I looked at the bull.*

First I looked at the bull. Then I felt scared.

When I got to the top, the bull rammed the pole.

First I got to the top. Then the bull rammed the pole.

Past progressive

- ◆ Two actions, one which happens first (progressive) and one which interrupts the other (simple past)
- ◆ Two actions happening at the same time
- ◆ An action happening at a specific (clock) time

The past progressive has several meanings. In many cases the past progressive is used to show that ***two actions were occurring at the same time, but that one of them started before the other.***

The bull got angry while I was climbing the tree.

My hands slipped while I was climbing the pole.

My friends called the police for help while I was climbing in the pole.

In these three sentences, the first clause is happening while I am climbing the pole. In each sentence, climbing the pole began before the other action.

Compare these two sentences:

When I saw my friend, I waved. (First I saw her. Then I waved)

When I saw my friend, I was waving. (First I was waving, perhaps at someone else. Then I saw my friend)

More on the past progressive

If a sentence has two clauses, both of which are in the past progressive, the speaker is showing that both actions happened at the same time.

While I was watching TV, my wife was reading.

I was doing the homework while she was shopping.

Using *the progressive + always* to complain

The present progressive is usually used for those actions that are ***happening (in progress) right now***. However, we have a *special* use of the present progressive to talk about situations where we have a ***strong, negative emotional feeling***.

Compare these sentences.

Mary helps me with my homework. (always, habit, everyday)

Mary is helping me with my homework (now)

Mary always takes my stuff without asking me. (always, habit, everyday)

Mary is always taking my stuff without asking me (complaining, negative feeling)

It doesn't make sense to say ***Mary is always helping me with my homework***. For most people that's a good thing.

I could say ***My roommate, Jack, is always leaving his dirty dishes in the sink. He should wash them.***

Expressions of place with progressive verbs

Word order in English is usually fixed. Expressions of place come at the ends of sentences/clauses. However, an expression of place can *sometimes* come between the **helping verb *be*** and the ***-ing verb*** in a **sentence in the progressive tense**.

Where is Bob?

He's *in the office* working?

Where's Tadros?

He's *at home* studying?

Where's Mao-Hsu?

He's *in the kitchen* making tea.

Notice that we can only do this with expressions of place. If I put **an expression of time** between the helping verb **be** and the **-ing verb** in a progressive sentence, the sentence will be incorrect.

X He is during the spring semester studying English. → He is studying English during the spring semester.

X She is in January leaving --> She is leaving in January.

What does *perfect* mean?

Many languages have only one way to talk about things which happened before now. They use some kind of past tense.

English has **six tenses** that are usually used to talk about events or states that occurred before now. These are the simple past, past progressive and the four perfect tenses.

The perfect tenses in English are simple to form. Every perfect tense has a form of **have** and a **past participle** (the 3rd form of the verb).

BASE	PAST	PAST PARTICIPLE
go	went	gone
eat	ate	eaten
walk	walked	walked
sit	sat	sat

The difficulty for most learners is not in **how** to form the perfect tense verbs; the problem is **when** to use a perfect and when to use a past form.

Basic meaning of perfect tenses

One way to think about the meaning of ALL perfect tense verbs (including the future perfect) is that they express a relationship between two actions, two states or two times.

When I had eaten, I went to school. (past perfect)

First: I ate Second: I went to school

I have been in the United States since 1994. (present perfect)

First: Before 1994 Second: 1994 to the present

I have never eaten Japanese food. (present perfect)

First: all the time before now Second: Now

Compare the sentences above with a sentence in the simple past.

Last night I had Japanese food.

(In this case, we are only concerned with one time - last night)

You may not see the difference right away, but try to keep it in mind as you go through this material and the exercises.

Present perfect

- ◆ Repeated action
- ◆ Time before now
- ◆ No specific past time
- ◆ Life experience
- ◆ Future completed action

Present perfect-repeated actions

The present perfect tense has several different meanings.

Think about your favorite movie. Is it Titanic or Gone with the Wind or Terminator II?

My favorite movie is a film called "Local Hero" I first saw it in 1982. Since then I have watched it at least 8 times

A friend of mine loves Titanic. She has seen it more than twenty times.



Repeated Actions

The (no -ing form) present perfect simple is used to talk about repeated actions.

We have studied three chapters so far.

I have written three letters this week.

I have asked him for help many times

Present perfect-before now

Present Perfect: Life Experience. No specific past time!

- ◆ *I have never touched a snake!*
- ◆ *I have seen elephants before, but only at the circus.*
- ◆ *I have never actually ridden an elephant*
- ◆ *I have never robbed a bank.*

Another important use of the present perfect is to talk about things that happened some time in the past before now. **Often we use these form to talk about our life experience.**

Important: You cannot use a specific time together with the present perfect.
XX I have seen her last week.

Since the present perfect expresses a relationship between two events or actions, **if the second event/action/time is not expressed, we always understand that the second event/action/time is NOW.**

Alex has studied several languages besides English.

(Question: Do we know when Alex studied them? No. We only know that he studied them before now.)

I'm going to watch TV. I have already done my homework.

(Question: When was the homework done? We know that it was done before now)

I can't go to sleep now. I haven't finished that report yet.

Already and **yet** and **so far** are often used with the present perfect in formal or written English. In spoken English, many native speakers will use the simple past.

I didn't do my homework yet.
(spoken)

I already did my homework.
(spoken)

IMPORTANT: Your goal is a knowledge of the kind of English which is used in academic work and business. The grammar of spoken English often breaks the rules.

For and since with present perfect

Present perfect tense sentences often include the expressions of time that start with **for** and **since** (*for three years, for two months, since last week, since 1994*).

For talks about the amount of time.
Since talks about the starting point.

Sometimes English language students are confused because they have heard their teachers say that both the present perfect simple and the present perfect progressive are used to talk about **the past to now**.

When do the simple and progressive forms have the same meaning?

- ◆ **There is not much difference between the simple and progressive when using these verbs: *live, work, teach & study***

Compare these sentences

I have lived here since 1993.

I have been living here since 1993.

Both of these sentences have the same meaning. Both talk about living here from the past to now. BUT only a very few verbs work this way. This small group includes the following verbs: **live**, **work**, **teach**, and **study**. With these four verbs, there is virtually no difference in the meanings of the present perfect simple and progressive forms. BUT with most other verbs, there is a difference.

Present perfect progressive

Past to Now

- ◆ Use the present perfect progressive when possible.
- ◆ Stative verbs will use the simple form.

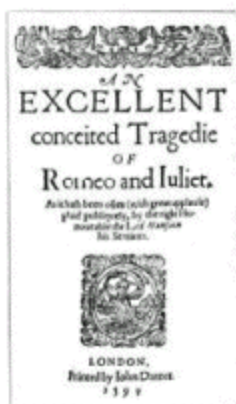
The most important meaning of the present perfect progressive is to talk about actions that started in the past and continue up until now.

Let's say that you had an appointment with your friend at the library for 2 PM. You go and wait for him at 2. At 3:00 your friend shows up. You are concerned and angry.
What happened? I have been waiting for you since 2 PM. I have been waiting for you for an hour.

It would be strange in English to use the simple form here (XX **I have waited for you for an hour**) Almost all native speakers will prefer the present perfect progressive here. Because of this, most of the time when you use **for** and **since** with a present perfect form, you will be using the present perfect progressive.

Stative verbs in the present perfect

One exception to what we have just been talking about is stative verbs. In the material on chapters 1 and 2 we said there was a group of verbs that generally do not take a progressive form. These verbs also will almost always use the present perfect simple form and not the present perfect progressive.



Romeo to Juliet: I have loved you for many years.

NOT I have been loving you for many years. (love is a stative verb)

Just and recently

The present perfect simple + "just" is often used to emphasize that something just happened.

I have just gotten some interesting news.

He has just finished the homework.

They have just arrived.

The present perfect progressive **without for** or **since** often has the meaning that something has recently been happening.

- **Why is your hair wet?**
- **Because I have been swimming.**

Here we understand that the speaker means s/he has been swimming **recently**.

If the speaker said I have been swimming since 5:00 s/he would be talking about an action from the past until now.

Past perfect

The past perfect is formed with had + a past participle verb (3rd form of the verb)

One way to think about the meaning of the past perfect is that it talks about the **past of the past**.

When the telephone rang I had eaten dinner.

Here we have two actions.

The clause that uses the **past perfect** always happens **first**.

The **simple past clause** happens **second**.

First I ate dinner. Second the telephone rang.



After Dr. Frankenstein had finished his experiments, he felt bad about them.

First Dr. F finished the experiments. Second he felt bad about them.

Caution: Strange example below!

Mr. Freud glarped the snagros when he had blurped the tramthos.

HUH??

Even though we don't know what this sentence means, we still know this:
First **Mr. Freud blurped the tramthos**. This has to be first because it is in the past perfect.
Then **he glarped the snagros**. This has to be second because it is in the simple past.

Past perfect progressive

The past perfect progressive talks about actions that have duration (actions that take time to perform) that were in progress but not finished before something else happened.

I had been studying for three hours when my friend arrived.

She had been looking for keys for 30 minutes before she gave up.



Forming the *future tense*

It's very easy to form the future tense in English. You either use **will + a base form of the verb** (**will go**; **will study**) or **be +going to + a base form** (**is going to learn**; **are going to give**).

There are also times when we use the simple present or the present progressive to talk about the future. Sometimes we can even use the present perfect!

Will and *be going to*

When you first started studying English, you probably learned that English has two to talk about future time: **will** and **be going to**. You may have asked your teacher about the difference between them. Your teacher may have told you they have the same meaning.

That's not quite true. There are some situations where they do have the same meaning, and there are other situations where *only* one form is appropriate.



Prediction

Imagine that you go to a fortuneteller. You give her some money and then she tells you about your future. Here's what she has to say:

In the future you are going to speak English very well.

You are going to get married within 10 years.

You will have five children. You will make a lot of money.

You are going to enjoy your life very much.

When we talk about a future prediction, we can use both *will* and *be going to*. There is very little, if any, difference in meaning between them.



Plan & intention

Imagine that you go over to your friend's house. In the living room are a couple of cans of paint and some paintbrushes.

What are these for?

I'm going to paint the living room.

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In this case native speaker never say ***I will paint the living room.***
Imagine that you are talking to your friend.

I've been thinking. I always have trouble with my car. I'm going to buy a new car.

In this case, you decided before to buy a new car. It is your *prior* plan.
It would sound odd to a native speaker of English if you said, *I've been thinking. I will buy a new car.*

Decision now

Decision made now (at the moment of speaking)
You are in class. The teacher drops his book on the floor. You say:

I will get that for you

When did you decide to pick up the teacher's book? You didn't decide in the morning, did you?

Today if the teacher drops his book on the floor, I'm going to pick it up for him

This was a decision made at the moment of speaking. When we decide something ***right now***, we often use **will**.

Willingness

If you are willing to do something, you agree with doing the activity. It is ok with you to do something.
Mother to child.



***Eat your spinach!
No, I won't.***

In this case the child is not ***willing*** to eat the spinach.

Before Toshi came to the United States, his mother gave him some advice

Mom: Study hard and make us proud.

Toshi: I will!

Mom: Don't take drugs!

Toshi: I won't.

Mom: Be careful in New York City.

Toshi: I will be.

Mom: Don't marry an American.

Toshi: Mom!

When we make a **promise** to somebody, we are expressing **willingness**. We often use **will** when we make a promise to somebody.

In the conversation above, Toshi promised his mother certain things. Toshi used **I will** and **I won't** to express the things he was willing to do (be careful, study hard, etc.) and the things he wasn't willing to do.

The future in time clauses

Time Clauses: Time clauses are dependent clauses beginning with a time word or phrase (adverbial expression of time). In these examples the underlined clauses are time clauses.

- A. When I return to my country, I will miss you.
- B. After I finish my homework, I'm going to watch some TV.
- C. By the time she arrives, we will have finished.
- D. Please call me as soon as you get to the airport.
- E. She will come home first before she goes to work.

Important!!! When we want to talk about the future in a time clause, English does not use will or be going to. We use the simple present.

When we want to talk about the future in a time clause, we usually use the simple present (not the future) tense.

Sometimes we use the present progressive tense to talk about things that will be in progress at a certain time in the future.

While I am doing my homework, I will watch the ball game tonight.

While you are taking classes next semester, I'm going to be working.

Present Perfect for Future

- Use the Present Perfect to emphasize that an action will be completed.
- After you have finished the test, please check it carefully.

The present perfect is even used occasionally to emphasize **completion** of an **action in the future**. These two sentences have almost the same meaning. Sentence B emphasizes that you have *completely* finished the test.

A. Please write your name on your test paper after you finish it.

B. Please write your name on your test paper after you have finished.

The sentences below all have mistakes about using time clauses in the future.

XX When I will see my family, I will be happy.

XX Please call me after you will finish your homework.

XX Before I will see him, I will see you.

Remember: future time clauses in English don't use the future tense; they usually use the simple present.

Talk about the future without using the future

Future verbs are not used in time clauses to talk about the future. There are a few other situations where we don't usually use a future tense verb to talk about future time.

Appointments (use the present progressive)

I am seeing the doctor next Thursday at noon.

Tomorrow I am having lunch with John and then I am meeting Maria at the library to study.

Schedules (use the simple present)

The library opens at 8 am tomorrow.

We often use the simple present when talking about schedules with verbs like leave, arrive, start, begin, open, close, etc. These sentences usually have some specific future time reference (next week, tomorrow, in an hour)

My brother's flight arrives at noon next Tuesday.

Future progressive

We use the future progressive tense to talk about actions that will be **in progress (but not completed)** at a specific time in the future.

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Often these sentences include **a clock time**.

Right now it is 8 p.m. and I am sitting in front of my computer as I always do. Tomorrow at 8 p.m. I will be sitting in front of my computer again.

Next month I will be relaxing on the beach while you are studying.

Future perfect

- ◆ The Past of the future
- ◆ Two actions, one which will happen before another in the future
- ◆ Often used with *By the time* & *By* (by next week, by next year)

In the introduction to the present perfect we said, "One way to think about the meaning of ALL perfect tense verbs (including the future perfect) is that they express a relationship between two actions, two states or two times."

The future perfect tense is easy to form. It always uses **will** (or **be going to**) + **have** + **a past participle** (3rd form of the verb)

will have finished

will have eaten

will have remembered

are going to have studied

are going to have bought

The future perfect has been called **the past of the future**. It is used to talk about an action or event that will happen before another action or event, both of which are in the future.

Imagine that it is 12 noon. You have already eaten breakfast. You may even have eaten lunch. But unless you are very hungry, you haven't eaten dinner yet. I can say,

By the time I get home at 10 PM tonight, I will have eaten dinner.

In this case two things are going to happen.

First: I will eat dinner.

Second: I will arrive home.

Both of these will happen in the future.

The action or event that will happen first is often put into the future perfect tense.

We haven't finished the course yet. We haven't reviewed modals yet.

By the time we finish the course, we will have reviewed the modals.

First: We will review modals.

Second: We will finish the course.

When you use the expressions **By the time** or **by (by next month; by next year; by the year 2006)**. You almost always **have to** use the future perfect.

XX By the time she arrives, I will eat dinner.

--> By the time she arrives, I will have eaten dinner.

Future perfect progressive

- ◆ Very rare!

English also has a **future perfect progressive**. It is used to talk about an activity that will be **in progress** before another activity happens. The future perfect progressive tense is very rarely used, so don't worry too much about it.

If he arrives at midnight, I will have been sleeping for two hours.

Verb tense charts

Simple	Simple	Progressive	Perfect	Perfect Progressive
Past	She helped her friend.	She was helping her friend.	She had helped her friend.	She had been helping her friend.
Present	She helps her friend.	She is helping her friend.	She has helped her friend.	She has been helping her friend.
Future	She will help her friend.	She will be helping her friend.	She will have helped her friend.	She will have been helping her friend.

Simple	Simple	Progressive	Perfect	Perfect Progressive
Past	She helped her friend yesterday.	She was helping her friend when I arrived	She had helped her friend before I arrived.	She had been helping her friend when the phone rang.
Present	She helps her friend every day	She is helping her friend now.	She has helped her friend many times before.	She has been helping her friend for two hours.
Future	She will help her friend tomorrow	She will be helping her friend when I get there.	She will have helped her friend by tomorrow.	She will have been helping her friend for a couple of hours by the time they stop.

Simple	Simple	Progressive	Perfect	Perfect Progressive
Past	Action/event/activity that occurred at a specific time in the past	An action/activity with duration which occurred in the past (often with clock time)	An action/event that occurred before another in the past	An action/activity with duration which occurred before another action/event

Present	A fact, a habit, something which generally happens or is always true	An action/activity with duration which is in progress at the moment of speaking (now)	An action/event that occurred before the moment of speaking (now)	An action/activity with duration that occurred before the moment of speaking (now)
Future	A future event or activity; a prediction	An action/activity with duration which will be in progress at a moment in the future	An action or event that will happen before another action/event in the future	An action/activity with duration that will occur before another action/event in the future

Spelling of *-ing* and *-ed* forms

When do we double a consonant before an ending? When do we use a single consonant? Since people judge your writing partly by your spelling, this is an area to review carefully.

If a one syllable word ends in one vowel + one consonant, then the consonant doubles.

Examples:

rob --> *robbed*, *robbing* *stop* --> *stopping*, *stopped* *beg* --> *begging*, *begged*

If the word ends in **two vowels one consonant**, the consonant does not double.

keep --> *keeping* *hear* --> *hearing*

If the word ends in **two consonants**, then the last consonant doesn't double.

last --> *lasting* *help* --> *helping*

If the word **finishes in "e"**, we drop the "e" and add the *-ing* ending or for past verbs just add *-d*.

hope --> *hoping* Compare this with "hop". *hop* --> *hopping*

Verbs that end in Y

Verbs that end in Consonant + y like study

study --> *studying*, *studied* *try* --> *trying*, *tried*

verbs that end in VOWEL + y like enjoy

enjoy --> *enjoying*, *enjoyed* (no change to the main part of the verb)

Verbs that end in *-ie* like die

die --> *dying*, *died* *lie* --> *lying*, *lied*

Verbs with two or more syllables

If the first syllable is stressed, the final consonant doesn't double.

If the last syllable is stressed the final consonant doubles.

OPen --> *opening*, *opened* *HAPpen* --> *happening*, *happened*

ocCUR --> *occurring*, *occurred* *beGIN* --> *beginning*