

English Verb Tenses



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Using different verb tenses is how you manipulate verbs (action words) in a sentence to show exactly when an action happened. When most people think of verb tenses in the English language, they think “Present, Past, Future.” However, each of these tenses have specific subgroups that you can use to change the meaning of the verb.

The Present

Simple Present

The Simple Present tense has two main purposes. It can describe something that happens right now:

I want to read.

In this sentence, the action of “want” is happening right at this moment.

The Simple Present tense can also describe something that happens regularly:

Donna reads in the living room.

This sentence implies that when Donna reads, she reads in the living room.

I work on Tuesdays.

Steve cooks dinner every night.

For the third person (he/she/they), you will add an “s” at the end of the verb.

Present Continuous

The Present Continuous tense is used to describe an action as it is happening. It also implies that the action right now may continue into the future. The Present Continuous is constructed using am/is/are + present tense verb + -ing.

Hannah is reading in the living room now.

They are singing in the choir.

We are going out to eat dinner tonight.

In this sentence, Hannah is currently reading in the living room, and her reading is continuing into the future.

An –ing must be added to the end of the action verb in the Present Continuous tense.

Present Perfect

The Present Perfect tense is used for two different purposes: 1) to describe an action that happened at an unknown time in the past, or 2) to describe an action that started happening in the past and continued until the present.

This tense is constructed using has/have + past tense verb.

I have walked down this path before.

Kellie has danced all night long.

They have changed so much since they were children!

Present Perfect Continuous

The Present Perfect Continuous tense is used to describe something that started happening in the past, continuously happened up to the present, and still happens during the present. It is constructed with have/has + been + verb + -ing.

I have been traveling since I was ten years old.

We have been married for twenty years.

Steve has been stressed all week.

The Past

Simple Past

The Simple Past tense is used when you want to describe something that happened in the past and is no longer happening now. For regular verbs, this is usually constructed by adding an –ed or a –d to the end of the verb.

Dan walked the dog in the park yesterday.

We climbed to the top of the mountain.

We shopped for groceries last week.

The teachers tried a new strategy.

Past Continuous

The Past Continuous is used to describe an action that began in the past, happened continuously over a period of time, and ended in the past. It is constructed using was/were + present tense verb + -ing.

They were playing so loudly at the concert.

Brian was running faster than anyone else.

I was reading my new book last night.

Past Perfect

The Past Perfect tense is used to refer to an action that happened at the beginning of a sequence of events in the past. It is constructed using had + simple past verb.

I saw that my dog had chewed up all of my shoes!

Kevin was relieved that they had remembered to bring an umbrella when it started to rain.

It may seem like the Simple Past tense could be used in these sentences; however, if you say:

I saw that my dog chewed up all of my shoes!

This sentence does not tie the action of chewing to any particular time in the past. It could imply that the dog routinely chews up shoes or continued chewing up shoes over a period of time.

Past Perfect Continuous

The Past Perfect Continuous tense is used to describe a continuous action that began and ended in the past. It is constructed using had been + present tense verb + -ing.

I had been working at the company for six years before they gave me a promotion.

The program was terminated, for it had not been working well since it was created.

The Future

Simple Future

The Simple Future tense is used when you want to describe something that is going to begin and end in the future. It is constructed using will + present tense verb.

Donna will read a new book tomorrow.

If it keeps raining, I will take the bus to work.

Another way to construct the Simple Future is with am/is/are + going to + present tense verb.

I am going to learn how to salsa this week!

They are going to read all the books by the end of the summer.

This is a common way to use the Simple Future tense in speech and informal communication, but it is just that—**informal**. It should not be used in academic or professional writing.

Future Perfect

The Future Perfect tense is used to describe an action that begins in the future and will end before another point in the future. It is constructed using will have + past tense verb.

The event will have ended by this time tomorrow.

Sam and Dave will have left the party by 6 o'clock.

To make the Future Perfect tense negative, you use will not have + past tense verb.

The event will not have ended by this time tomorrow.

I will not have learned enough by the time I take the test.

Future Continuous

The Future Continuous tense is used to describe something that is going to happen over a continuous period of time in the future. It is constructed using will be + present tense verb + -ing.

On Saturday night, I will be playing in the orchestra for the first time.

One day, I will be working at my dream job.

Future Perfect Continuous

The Future Perfect Continuous tense is used to describe an action that began in the past and continues into some point in the future. It is constructed using will have been + present tense verb + -ing.

At 8 o'clock, I will have been waiting for my ride for an hour.

We will have been working here for ten years in August.

Helping Verbs

Helping verbs (also called auxiliary verbs) come before the main action verb in a sentence. Here is a list of English helping verbs:

- is, am, are, was, were
- be, being, been
- has, have, had
- do, does, did
- will, shall, should, would

- can, could
- may, might, must

When combined with a main action verb, these helping verbs can manipulate its tense. They are used in most of the tenses, except for the Simple Present and Simple Past. Below, the helping verb is highlighted in each sentence.

We are going to the grocery store today.

They might have left the door unlocked earlier today.

I should be arriving at the event soon.

Sam and Dave were playing music too loudly.