



Verb Tenses

As you probably already know, verbs express actions (what a person or thing does) or states of being (that a person or thing exists). A verb's tense is the form that a verb takes to indicate *when* that action or condition occurred. Properly using verb tense is critical to clear communication because verbs clarify time sequence and order of events and ultimately give the writer the amount of control needed to express complicated ideas effectively.

Although the number of verb tenses may seem overwhelming, do not be intimidated. There are really only four basic types of tenses, each one with its own past, present, and future form. And each of these is probably already familiar to you, even if you don't know them by name, since you more than likely use them regularly in everyday speech. Using correct verb tense relies not just on knowing how to form these tenses, however, but just as importantly, on knowing which tense to use in a given situation. Look at the following explanations to get a better grasp of when to use each tense.

Simple

Tenses: The simple tenses are the least complicated of all the tenses.

Present: In simple present tense, a verb will either retain its base form or end in –s depending on the verb's subject. (See the Subject-Verb Agreement handout for more details). Simple present tense has several uses:

It can indicate an action taking place at the time it is expressed in speech or writing.

Example: I *hear* you.

It is used to express actions that occur habitually.

Example: My teacher always *assigns* homework over holiday weekends.

It is used when speaking about scientific facts, or truths that are not likely to change.

Example: The climate of El Salvador *is* tropical.

It is used when writing about literature.

Example: In *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck *helps* Jim escape his bonds of slavery.

Past: Simple past tense indicates that the action expressed by the verb has already been completed. As you probably know, simple past tense verbs are formed by adding an –ed ending to the base form of the verb.

Example: Damon *walked* three miles yesterday.

Be aware, however, of irregular verbs that do not follow this pattern, such as the verb *to eat*, which changes to *ate* in the past tense.

Future: Simple future tense is the only simple tense which demands more than a one word verb. This is because the future tense is formed by combining the helping verb *will* with the base form of the verb. Obviously, future tense is used to indicate that an action will, or is likely to occur in the future.

Example: My brother *will take* me to Las Vegas this weekend.

Perfect

Tenses: The perfect tenses indicate actions that will be completed by the time another action or condition has taken place. The three perfect tenses are formed by using the simple past, present, or future form of the verb *to have* plus the past participle form of the main verb in the sentence. (Verbs in the past participle usually end in –ed, just like verbs in past tense form. However there are irregular verbs that do not follow this pattern.)

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Present Perfect: Present perfect is used to indicate an action or condition that began in the past, often at an unspecified time, and continues up until the present.

Example: Mrs. Hudson *has taught* first grade for thirteen years (up until now).

Past Perfect: Past perfect is used to express an action or condition that is completed before a specific time or event which also occurred in the past.

Example: The restaurant *had closed* by the time Thomas arrived.

Future Perfect: Future perfect is used to express actions or conditions that will be completed by a certain time or event in the future.

Example: By the end of this year, I *will have graduated* from college.

Progressive

Tenses: The Progressive tenses convey the idea that an action is in progress or that it is continuing. The three progressive tenses are formed by combining the appropriate form of the verb *to be* (is, are, was, were, will be) with the main verb's *—ing* form.

Present Progressive: Present progressive is used to express ongoing actions occurring right now.

Example: He *is delivering* the document as we speak.

Past Progressive: Past progressive indicates an action in the past that took place over a period of time. Often times this progressive action is interrupted by another action in the past.

Example: Ming *was walking* through the woods when a deer bounded past her.

Future Progressive: Future progressive tense indicates an ongoing action that will begin some time in the future.

Example: Travis *will be eating* dinner by the time we arrive.

Perfect

Progressive

Tenses: As the name implies, the perfect progressive tenses combine elements of both the perfect and progressive tenses. They express continuous actions in progress up until a certain, specific time or event. The Perfect progressive tenses are formed with the following formula: the appropriate form of the verb *have* + *been* + the *-ing* form of the main verb. Just like the regular perfect tenses, the distinction between past, present, and future depends solely on the conjugation of the verb *have*.

Present Perfect Progressive: Present perfect progressive expresses a continuous action that began in the past and continues up until the present.

Example: We *have been waiting* for the bus for twenty minutes.

Past Perfect Progressive: Past perfect progressive expresses an ongoing action which began in the past and continues up until another time or event in the past.

Example: The children *had been playing* catch for only ten minutes before they broke the window.

Future Perfect Progressive: Future perfect progressive expresses a continuous action in the future that takes place up until another time event in the future.

Example: We *will have been working* for nine hours by the end of the day.

* This handout was adapted with permission from a similar one used by Columbia College's Academic Achievement Center.

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