

Verb Tense

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Introduction

English verb tenses tell when an action took place, whether or not it ended, and what effect it has on a situation. There are three basic time periods when actions can occur (past, present, and future) and four aspects (simple, perfect, progressive, and perfect progressive). When combined, the resulting tenses give information about the action in a sentence. The chart below gives examples of the results of these combinations:

	Simple	Perfect	Progressive	Perfect Progressive
Past	Arrived	Had arrived	Was/were arriving	Had been arriving
Present	Arrive	Has/have arrived	Am/is/are arriving	Has/have been arriving
Future	Will arrive	Will have arrived	Will be arriving	Will have been arriving

Note: *You may have noticed that many of these tenses have additional words (e.g., had, am, will) preceding them. These are known as auxiliaries, and are used to form many English verb tenses. In fact, only two English verb tenses (simple past and simple present) do not use auxiliaries.*

Simple Tenses: Simple tenses convey a sense of a completed action without strict regard to time or when the action began or ended.

Perfect Tenses: Unlike the simple tenses, the perfect tenses do indicate a relationship between two points in time such as a relationship between a past action and present circumstances. For perfect tenses, the action taken is finite: it has ended or will end.

Progressive Tenses: In the progressive tenses, an action is still occurring or is otherwise incomplete, and the tense may not indicate when the action will end. It may convey a sense of uncertainty or that a situation is “in flux”; it represents a current state of affairs, but not a permanent one. All progressive tenses use the present participle (-ing) ending of a verb combined with auxiliaries before the verb.

Perfect Progressive Tenses: The perfect progressive tense is a combination of the perfect and progressive tenses that discusses an incomplete action that was occurring for a period of time before coming to an end. This sense of an ending is what sets the perfect progressive tenses apart from the progressive tenses. Like the progressive tense, it uses the present participle of the verb combined with preceding auxiliaries.

Verb Conjugation Websites

Some verbs in English do not follow the normal patterns of conjugation and are therefore considered irregular. For example, to go (went, gone); to be (was/were, been); to see (saw, seen); to sing (sang, sung). If you have more questions about how to conjugate a verb in one of its many tenses, there are many online resources including **conjugator.reverso.net** and **verbix.com** that you can use to check conjugations.

Commonly Used Tenses

Since 80% of academic writing uses the present simple, past simple, and present perfect tenses, we will give particular attention to these three tenses.

Present Simple: The present simple tense describes what is currently happening and is the most common tense. In academic writing, use this tense unless otherwise required.

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
<i>First Person</i>	I think	We think
<i>Second Person</i>	You think	You all (plural) think
<i>Third Person</i>	She/he/(singular noun) thinks	They/all of you/(plural noun) think

Example Sentence: We believe math is important to learn.

Past Simple: The past simple tense describes in general terms what happened in the past without giving a specific ending point. In academic writing, use this tense to a) introduce others' research when mentioning a specific study and/or researcher and b) to talk about your methodology/data in your own study.

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
<i>First Person</i>	I ate	We ate
<i>Second Person</i>	You ate	You all (plural) ate
<i>Third Person</i>	She/he/(singular noun) ate	They/all of you/(plural noun) ate

Example Sentence: I went out shopping in my free time yesterday.

Present Perfect: The present perfect tense describes something done in the past which still has an effect on the subject today, or which began in the past and is continuing into the present. It is formed by taking the simple past tense and adding the auxiliaries "have/has" in front of it. In academic writing, this tense is used to refer to the history of a topic or previous research that is still relevant today (e.g., "what has been discovered"). It can also introduce a new topic (e.g., "there have been several studies done on the topic").

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
<i>First Person</i>	I have felt	We have felt
<i>Second Person</i>	You have felt	You all (plural) have felt
<i>Third Person</i>	She/he/(singular noun) has felt	They/all of you/(plural noun) have felt

Example Sentence: You have known about the deadline for a while.

A Common Myth

All verbs in a passage must be in the same tense – WRONG! The tense of a verb can change – even within a sentence – depending on whether you are speaking about the past, present, or future. This is called sequence of verb tenses. If you're confused there is excellent information on Capital Community College's website (<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/sequence.htm>). Here are a few examples using simple present and simple past constructions:

- **Simple Present** (*showing action that occurred at the same time using present tense*)
Ex: I love my mother because she sends me care packages.
- **Simple Present** (*showing earlier action using past tense*)
Ex: I usually work from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., but Sarah worked from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.
- **Simple Present** (*showing a period of time that extends from the past to the present using present perfect*)
Ex: They think that they have made the right choice.
- **Simple Present** (*showing an action in the future using future tense*)
Ex: The director says that she will enact change.
- **Simple Past** (*showing two or more completed actions using past tense*)
Ex: I wanted to leave because they told me they no longer needed me.
- **Simple Past** (*showing an earlier action using past perfect tense*)
Ex: I knew she had done the right thing.
- **Simple Past** (*showing a general truth using the present tense*)
Ex: Early scientists believed that the world is flat.

Less Commonly Used Tenses

The remaining tenses and their aspects are used only 20% of the time in academic writing.

Future Simple:

- The future simple tense is used to describe actions that will happen at some point in the future. It is constructed by adding the auxiliary “will” in front of the verb.
- Ex: He will go to the beach.
 - This is the future simple tense because we know it will happen at some point in the future, but not exactly when.

Past Perfect:

- The past perfect describes actions that happened in the past *before* other past actions. This tense is constructed by using the verb's past participle form and adding the auxiliary word “had” before the verb.
- Ex: I ate the blackberries that I had grown.
 - This is the past perfect tense because I had to grow the blackberries before I could eat them.

Future Perfect:

- The future perfect describes actions that will be completed by a specific time in the future. It is constructed by using the verb's past participle and adding the auxiliary words “will have/had” before the verb.
- Ex: They will have eaten the entire cake by Thursday.
 - This is in the future perfect tense because the action will end at a specific time.

Past Progressive:

- The past progressive tense describes an incomplete or interrupted action that was occurring at some point in the past but may not still be occurring now. It uses the auxiliaries “was/were.”
- Ex: She was dreaming about petting a puppy when my alarm clock went off.
 - This is in past progressive tense because it describes an incomplete, interrupted action that took place in the past.

Present Progressive:

- The present progressive tense describes an action that is currently occurring that may not have a definitive ending point. It uses the auxiliaries “am/is/are.”
- Ex: The cat is freaking out, and John and I are wondering why.
 - This is present progressive tense because it describes something that is currently happening (the cat freaking out, John and I wondering why) without giving any indication about when these actions might end (the cat could continue panicking for some time).

Future Progressive:

- The future progressive tense describes an action that will occur at some point in the future, but no indication is given of when the action will end. It uses the auxiliary “will be.”
- Ex: I will be traveling to France this week.
 - This is future progressive tense because it describes something that will be in progress in the future without giving an exact idea of when or if that action will end.

Past Perfect Progressive:

- The past perfect progressive describes an action that had been occurring for some time in the past before ending. It uses the auxiliaries “had been.”
- Ex: I had been swimming in the lake before lunch.
 - This is the past perfect progressive tense because it describes an action that had been occurring for a non-specific amount of time before ending at lunch.

Present Perfect Progressive:

- The present perfect progressive is used for actions that have been occurring for some time up until the present time, when the action has either definitively ended or is continuing forward into the future. It uses the auxiliaries “has/have been.”
- Ex: He has been studying for two hours.
 - This is in the present perfect progressive tense because the action has been occurring in the past up until the present, where it may or may not end.

Future Perfect Progressive:

- The future perfect progressive deals with describing actions that have been ongoing during the present and/or past and are continuing into the future, where they will stop at a defined point or reach another relevant milestone. It uses the auxiliary phrase “will have been.”
- Ex: At midnight, she will have been studying chemistry for four hours.
 - This is in the future perfect progressive tense because it describes an action that has been ongoing for some time that will reach a milestone and possibly end in the future.

* For more information on the future perfect progressive tense, please refer to the “Conditional Phrases + Modals” handout.

Works Consulted:

Purdue University Online Writing Lab (owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/); Azusa Pacific University Writing Center (apu.edu/writingcenter/); UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center (writingcenter.unc.edu/); “Editing Line by Line” from *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* (article by Linville; book ed. by Rafoth)