



School of Liberal Arts

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English Verb Tense Overview

When discussing English sentence structure, it is useful to have a basic understanding of verb tenses. English verb tenses fall into three general time frames—past, present and future. Within each of these time frames are four fundamental types of verb tenses, distinguished by both structure and function. These are the simple tenses, progressive¹ tenses, perfect tenses and perfect progressive tenses. This handout provides an overview of the English language verb tenses and some basic information about their structures and most common uses in active voice.

General Guidelines with English Verbs

1. **Use time expressions for clarity.** In the example sentences included in the charts below, note the use of time expressions, which clarify the intended time frame. In a paragraph context, a relevant time expression may occur in a nearby sentence.
2. **Make subjects and verbs agree.** Also note that verbs must agree with the subject of the sentence with regard to person and number. In the sentence "The assignment is due next Thursday," the subject "assignment" is in third person singular so the verb is, too.
3. **Pay attention to clause relationships within a sentence.** In complex sentences the tense of the subordinate time or condition clause is influenced by the tense used in the main clause. For example, in the sentence "If my teacher assigns a lot of homework, I will be up all night," the subordinate clause verb, which refers to a future event, is in present time because the future tense is already expressed in the main clause verb.
4. **Be consistent.** Verb tense consistency is important in English writing. Consistency means keeping verbs in the same time frame. For example, to express tense changes but remain in the present time frame, the verbs in a passage may shift between simple present, present progressive, and present perfect.²
5. **Some tense shifts make sense.** Despite the tendency to be consistent with time frame, tense shifts are sometimes appropriate. Tense shifts often occur when we provide background information or past examples for a topic, compare events from two different time periods, or provide current commentary on past events.
6. **Bending the rules.** A verb can sometimes be paired with a time expression to indicate a time frame other than the one the verb tense normally represents. For example, a present tense verb can indicate future time when used with an appropriate time expression e.g. "I **am planning** to do my homework **tomorrow**." This type of construction is more frequent in conversation than in academic writing.

¹ The term "continuous" is often used instead of "progressive."

² Many style guides dictate verb tense usage. For example, when you are formatting a research paper in APA format, it's a good idea to check the verb tense consistency guidelines for different sections of a document.

Simple Tenses

The simple tenses can be thought of as referring to events that are complete wholes. No further development is anticipated.

| | Simple Past | Simple Present | Simple Future |
|-------------------|--|---|--|
| Structures | The past tense form of the verb | The present tense form of the verb | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. will + the simple form of the verb 2. BE + going to + the simple form of the verb |
| Uses | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. an action or situation that began and ended in the past 2. an action or situation that existed usually, always, or habitually in the past 3. in complex sentences: an untrue condition (subordinate clause), combined with a 'would' result (main clause) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. a future scheduled event (with a future time expression) 2. an action or situation that exists usually, always, or habitually 3. a truth or fact 4. in complex sentences: a condition or time-related action (subordinate clause), combined with a future time result (main clause) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. an action or condition that is expected to occur at some time or over a period of time in the future 2. an event or situation that is expected to exist usually, always, or habitually in the future 3. in complex sentences: the result (main clause), combined with a condition or time related action (subordinate clause) |

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| Examples | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teacher assigned two problems last week. 2. The teacher assigned problems regularly. 3. If you did the work, you would understand more. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An assignment is due next Thursday. 2. The teacher assigns problems every day. 3. There are twenty-four hours in a day. 4. If/After I finish the problems, I will hand them in. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teacher will assign more problems next week. 2. This class is going to be challenging. 3. If/before I hand in my work, I will check it. |
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Progressive Tenses

The progressive tenses can be thought of as referring to events or actions that are “imperfect.” They are in process or incomplete, and there exists the possibility of further development or change.

| | Past Progressive | Present Progressive | Future Progressive |
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| Structures | a past tense form of BE (was/were) + a present participle ³ | a present tense form of BE (is/are) + a present participle | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. will be + a present participle 2. BE (is/are) going to + a present participle |

³ Present participles end in –ing e.g. *working, studying*. Certain verbs (stative verbs such as *know, hate* and *love*) are said to not occur in progressive forms. However, they are often used in a progressive way, particularly in conversation, to create an effect, e.g. *“I’m loving this music,”* thereby turning a state into an event.

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| Uses | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. an action/ condition already in progress at a certain time or occurrence in the past 2. a repeated action in the past | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. an action/condition that is in progress now 2. an action in the extended present that will eventually end 3. a temporary situation 4. a repeated action | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. an action/condition that will be in progress at a certain point in time or when another event occurs in the future 2. an action that will continue for a length of time in the future |
| Examples | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teacher was assigning problems when the bell rang. 2. I was studying all last week. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teacher is assigning problems right now. 2. I am studying physics this semester. 3. I am struggling with the homework problems. 4. My physics teacher is assigning difficult problems. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teacher will be assigning problems at the end of class. 2. The teacher is going to be assigning work all semester. |

Perfect Tenses

The perfect tenses are used to refer back in time to prior events or time periods. They generally refer to actions that began sometime in the previous time frame and continue up to or into the subsequent one.

| | Past Perfect | Present Perfect | Future Perfect |
|-------------------|--|---|---|
| Structures | had + a past participle ⁴ | have/has + a past participle | 1. will have + a past participle 2. BE (is/are)+ going to have + past participle |
| Uses | 1. an event or condition that occurred before another event or time in the past 2. in complex sentences, an untrue condition (subordinate clause) | 1. an event or situation that began before now and continues into the present 2. a prior action that has current relevance 3. a very recently completed action 4. an action that occurred over a prior time period and is completed at the moment of speaking. 5. in complex sentences: a time related event or condition (subordinate clause) | 1. a future action or condition that will be completed before another event or time in the future |

⁴ Past participles generally end in -ed, but may be irregular e.g. worked, studied, eaten, ran.

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| Examples | <p>1. She had assigned several problems before the class ended.</p> <p>2. If I had studied more, I would have earned an A.</p> | <p>1. I have been in this class for two weeks.</p> <p>2. The teacher has assigned this chapter already.</p> <p>3. I have just finished tomorrow's homework.</p> <p>4. I have studied the course material for three hours.</p> <p>5. When I have finished today's problems, I will be able to relax.</p> | <p>1. I will have been studying Academic Writing for three years by the time I graduate next spring.</p> |
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Perfect Progressive Tenses

The perfect progressive tenses combine perfect and progressive meanings. They refer back in time to prior events and time periods and they have a sense of incompleteness.

Past Perfect Progressive

Present Perfect Progressive

Future Perfect Progressive

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|------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Structures | had + been + a present participle | have/has + been + a present participle | <p>1. will have + been + a present participle</p> <p>2. BE (is/are)+ going to have + been + present participle</p> |
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| Uses | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> an action or habitual action taking place over a period of time in the past, prior to some other event or time. in complex sentences: a past action in progress (main clause) that was interrupted by a more recent past action | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a situation, habit or action that began in the past and continues up to the present (and possibly into the future) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> an ongoing or habitual action that is taking place in the present and will continue into the future until or into a specific time. |
| Examples | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher had been assigning five problems a day prior to midterms. The teacher had been planning to have an in-class exam, but she had a take-home exam instead. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher has been meeting with students in her office every day. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> By the time you get here, I will have been studying for The final for eight hours. |

Additional References available in the UWC:

- For grammar exercises on forming/selecting tenses and correcting verb tense errors see the following:
Grammar Dimensions 4: Forms, Meaning and Use (2nd ed.) by Jan Frodesen and Janet Eyring
Grammar Troublespots, pp. 41-72, by Ann Raimes
Writing Clearly, An Editing Guide, pp.3-48, by Janet Lane and Ellen Lange
Understanding and Using English Grammar by Betty Azar
- For more complex discussions of verb tenses, see the following:
The Grammar Book, pp.109-136, by Marianne Celce-Mucia and Diane Larsen-Freeman.
Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English by Doulgas Bieber et al.

Meg Leimkuhler, Spring 2010