

The Past Tense Guide

Simple Past

[verb + ed] or irregular verbs

Use 1: Completed action in the past

- *I went to my English lesson yesterday.*

Use 2: A series of completed actions in the past

- *I went to my English lesson, then I had dinner with my new classmates, then I walked home.*

Use 3: Habits in the past or duration in the past

- *I learned English for two years.*
- *I visited my friend in England every year when I was younger.*
- *I used to go swimming three times a week when I was a child.*

EXTRA TIP: We often use ago with sentences in the past tense:

- *I bought my first guitar a long time **ago**.*

Past Continuous

[was/were + present participle]

Use 1: Interrupted action in the Past

- *I was doing my English homework when you called.*

Use 2: Action continuing at a specific time (était en train de)

- *Last night at six o' clock I was doing my English homework.*

Use 3: Parallel actions

- *I was watching Desperate Housewives while he was doing his homework.*



Present Perfect Simple

[has / have + past participle]

When we use the Present Perfect, the exact time is not important.
You **CANNOT** use the Present Perfect with specific time expressions such as: yesterday, one year ago, last week, when I was a child, when I lived in Japan, at that moment, that day, one day, etc.

Use 1: Life experience (an unspecified time before now)

- She has been to New York several times.
- Have you met my English teacher before?

To talk about past experience using the Present Perfect we can use unspecific expressions such as: **ever, never, once, twice, many times, several times, before, so far, already, yet.**

Use 2: Recent news or events with a link to the present

- I have just eaten a big English breakfast and now I am so full.
- She has recently started her English lessons and she loves them!



For use 2 we can use the Present Perfect with expressions relating to recent events such as: **just, recently, lately, in the last few days/weeks etc., in a while**

Use 3: A past action which continues in the present

- I haven't seen you for ages, let's meet up for a coffee at the weekend.
- They have been chatting in English all night!

Note that for use 3, we can interchange the present perfect simple with the present perfect continuous form. Compare the following:

- **She has worked** here for years
or
- **She has been working** here for years.

For use 3 we can use the Present Perfect with time frames that have started but not yet finished such as: **today, tonight, all night, this morning / afternoon / week / month / year, all day/night, for ages / days / weeks / a long ti**

Past Perfect Simple

[had + past participle]

Use 1: An action before something in the past

The Past Perfect is used to talk about **something that happened before another action** or **before a specific time in the past**.

- **She had studied** English before she moved to NYC.
- **She had** never **been** to a show in Broadway before last night.
- Tom knew Sidney like the back of his hand because **he had visited** the city on several occasions.
- She only understood the movie because **she had read** the book.

Compare these two sentences:

John left the house at 7:30 yesterday morning.

Mary rang John's doorbell at 8:15 yesterday.

Both actions happened in the past so we use the past simple tense. However, we can also combine the sentences:

Mary rang John's doorbell at 8:15 yesterday but John had already left the house.

We use the past perfect (had left) because the action happened before another action in the past (Mary rang the doorbell.)

Use 2: A continuous action before something in the past

The Past Perfect can express something started in the past and continued up until another action in the past.

- **He had had** his dictionary for twenty years before it finally fell apart.
- By the time Alex finished his studies, **he had been** in London for over eight years.
- They were quite sad about selling the house because **they had lived** in it for more than thirty years.

Look at some more examples of the past perfect:

- When Marie opened the washing machine she realized that **she had washed** the cat.
- I got a letter from John last week. **We had been** at school together years ago but **we had lost** touch with each other.

Compare these two sentences:

James had cooked breakfast when we got up.

James cooked breakfast when we got up.

In the first sentence, the past perfect tells us that James cooked breakfast before we got up. In the second sentence, first we got up and then James cooked breakfast.

Past Perfect Continuous

[had + been + verb+ING]

USE 1: A continuous action before something in the past

The Past Perfect Continuous denotes something started that in the past and continued up until another time in the past. Note that although this is related to the Present Perfect Continuous, the action does not continue until now, but stops before another action in the past.

- **They had been chatting** for over an hour before Tessa arrived.
- **She had been working** at that company for three years when it went out of business.
- How long **had you been waiting** to get on the bus?
- Mike wanted to go for a run because **he had been sitting** at his desk all day.

USE 2: Cause and consequences of a past action

Using the Past Perfect Continuous before another action in the past is a good way to show cause and effect.

- Emily realized that **she had been working** too hard so she decided to have a break.
- Jack was tired because **he had been doing** his homework for hours!
- By the time Jane arrived **they had been waiting** for 3 hours and were very angry.
- Kathryn passed the test with flying colours because **she had been working** nonstop!