

# IIT Madras

## BSc Degree

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**English – I (Basic English)**  
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**Past Tense**

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A video thumbnail showing a woman with glasses and a yellow patterned shirt speaking. The title "THE PAST TENSE : Forms and Meanings" and the name "Lida Paul" are displayed above her.

Hello and welcome everyone to the class. We will continue talking about representation of time in the English language. Today we will talk about past tense or the past time and its representation. We will look at both the forms and meanings as we have been doing for the other tense forms as well.

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**Simple Past tense**



- It is the most commonly used tense to refer to past time.
- It signifies two major points with respect to the time of the action.
  - i) The event is in the past.
  - ii) The event is finished.

Eg. She returned from the conference yesterday.

A handwritten red annotation on the slide. It shows the word "returned" underlined in red. A red arrow points from the underlined "re" to the "t" in "returned".



We will begin the class today by talking about simple past tense. Simple past tense forms in English, the obvious function that they have is to refer to the past time which means this is the most basic form that you use to talk about past time in English. In addition to that, what a past tense form in English could also mean especially the simple past tense form in English could mean is that the event is completed or the event is finished. We look at this example here to understand what it means by simple past tense forms.

So, this is a simple example you have here, “she returned from the conference yesterday”. The verb here is written, and it is in the simple past tense form, which is indicated by the suffix ‘ed’. So, in the sentence, the suffix ‘ed’ tells you that the sentence is written in the simple past tense form. And the basic form of simple past tense in English language is this, which is an ‘ed’ suffix that is attached to the main verb.

In case of irregular verbs. However, you do not see the ed suffix with the main verb, instead, you see a change in the word internally, and that change is usually the internal change of one of the sounds in the word. Like for example, you have words like drive, drove, steal, stole. So, these are all examples of irregular verbs and in irregular verbs the change is internal, usually the change of an internal sound within the word and not the ‘ed’ suffix attached to the main verb which indicates the past tense form of the verb.

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continued



- The use of simple past tense is also common in fictional narration to describe events and states as imagined in the past.
- Eg. One evening after dark a young man prowled among these crumbling red mansions, ringing their bells. At the twelfth he rested his lean hand baggage upon the step and wiped the dust from his hatband and forehead. The bell sounded faint and far away in some remote, hollow depths.

- O.Henry ,The Furnished Room



So, simple past tense in English, can also be used to talk about a character, state of mind, or to describe an event that has happened in the past. All of this happens in the fictional writing process. Of course, other forms of the tenses or time can also be used in the fictional

narration. There is no restriction to that. But the meanings produced by the usage of the other tense forms, or the other time will certainly be different from what is intended from the past tense narration.

We have an example here to give us a sense of what happens in a past tense narration. This is an excerpt from a short story written by O Henry and the story is “The furnished room”. Let us have a look at the excerpt and understand how past tense is used in narrative technique in fictional writing.

So, “one evening, after dark a young man prowled among these crumbling red mansions, ringing their bells at the twelfth he rested his lean hand baggage upon the step and wiped the dust from his headband and forehead. The bell sounded faint and far away in remote hollow depths.” So, we will first underline the past tense forms, you have ‘prowled’, then you have ‘rested’ then you have ‘wiped’ and then you also have the word ‘sounded’.

Look at this excerpt carefully, read it very closely, and you will be able to identify what has been written in the first point here, which is that narration to describe events and states as imagined in the past. So, all of these words that you see here prowled rested, wiped, sounded, they all give you a sense of narration and all of the events that have happened or as imagined in the past.

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Structure of simple past tense

- i) She arranged her clothes in the wardrobe. (Affirmative sentence)  
verb red
- ii) She did not finish her work on time. (Negative sentence)  
tense
- iii) Did you go to/ not go to college today? (Interrogative sentence)  
tense
- iv) For interrogative sentences with the wh-words,  
What did he eat?  
tense



We will look at the structure of simple past tense now. So, the first sentence you have here is “she arranged her clothes in the wardrobe”. This is an affirmative sentence or a non-negative

sentence or a positive sentence. Whatever is suitable you can call it as it is. But we are more concerned with the structure part, whenever we discuss about the structure, especially with respect to tense forms. Our focus is mostly going to be around this part of the sentence which is the verb because it is around the verbs that you see most of the modifications that are required to form various tense forms.

So, we look at the first sentence, “she arranged your clothes in the wardrobe”, you have the verb ‘arrange’ here. And of course, you have the ‘ed’ suffix which tells you that this particular sentence is written in the simple past tense form. So, we know this. But let us look at the second sentence. We see that it is a little different from the first one.

She did not finish your work on time. There are at least two differences in this from the first sentence that we have seen. The first one is a negative sentence, indicated by the word ‘not’ which is a marker of negation. Another part is that you have an additional verb form here called the ‘did’. what is this ‘did’ doing here? the function of this task, the function of this verb ‘did’ is to provide tense to the sentence.

So, unlike in the previous sentence, you do not have an ‘ed’ form to the word finish here. Instead, you see, another verb ‘did’. This is in the general language referred to as an auxiliary verb, but the function of this particular verb in the sentence is to act as the tense marker for this given sentence. So, finish is not bearing anything on it which could provide for tense instead that is provided by the auxiliary ‘did’. So, in negative sentences particularly, you will see that to indicate tense you will have an additional auxiliary like ‘did’.

Now, for the third sentence, “did you go to or did you not go to college today?” This is an example of an interrogative sentence or what is also referred to as a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ question which means the answer to this question could be either in yes or no. So, even in this case, you see that the verb is in its bare form and it does not have anything around it. It has not undergone any modification. By itself, to provide for the tense in the sentence. Again, in the sentence, the tense is supplied using the auxiliary did.

Same is the case with the last sentence again and interrogative sentence. This time wh-word sentence, which means this as a content question, so “what did he eat?” Again, in this one, the verb is ‘eat’, but it has come without any modifications to show tense, and that work is performed by did in this sentence.

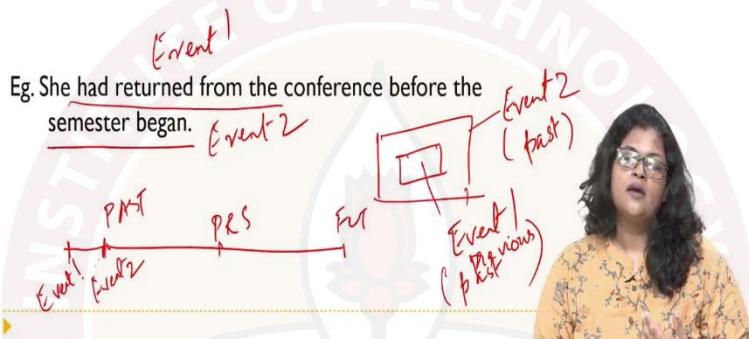
So, except for the first sentence where you had a regular verb like arrange and suffix ed attached to it to show that it is a past tense form. All the other three sentences that we have had here, the ‘negative sentence’, the ‘yes’ or ‘no’ interrogative, and the WH interrogative, all of them use ‘did’ to supply tense to their verb. So, this is about the structure of simple past tense.

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### Perfect Aspect in the past

- It signifies
  - i) A past state of action in relation to the previous past
  - ii) Past before past or the embedded past



We will move on to the next past tense form or the next way in which we can talk about past time in English. And that is the perfect aspect of the past or, which is also referred to as the past perfect tense in English. What does the past perfect form signify? Now, unlike your simple past tense form, the perfective aspect is usually something that is used to talk about relational time. So, which means perfect tense form does not give you an absolute sense of the time, but it will talk about time in relation to some other time. And we will see what does relational, meaning of time is.

In the case of past perfect form, it is usually the relation of a previous past, to the current past. So we will understand this again, using the example we have here. “She had returned from the conference before the semester began.” Let us say for the sake of convenience, take the events in this sentence as event 1 and event 2. By event, I mean, the verbs used in the sentence. So, the first event here is that “she had returned from the conference”. So, I am going to name this as event 1. And then the second thing that you see here, the verb you have here is ‘began’. So, ‘semester began’. I am going to call this as event 2.

Now, you see something here, past before past or the embedded past. We will understand what this embedded past means. If I am going to represent this diagrammatically, I am going to call this particular event, this particular box has event 2. And since we are talking about embedding, I am going to put another box within this outer box that I have drawn and call this the event 1. Now what does this mean? That event 1 is embedded within even 2 or event 1 is what I am going to call as the previous past and event 2 as the current past or simply the past action.

So, previous past obviously, something that has gone before the current past. So that is what is embedding shows. Embedded past means an event that has happened before a past event. If I am to draw a timeline, you have, say ‘the future here’, the present here and if you have the past here, then both these events event 1 and 2, have happened in the past, but the difference is that if this is your past point, then this is your event 2 and event 1 is somewhere that is event 1 has happened before event 2. Event 1 is embedded within event 2.

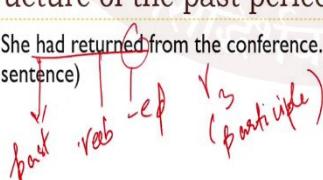
So previous past, “she had returned from the conference before the semester began”, what happened first is ‘returning from the conference’ and the recent past is the beginning of the semester. So, when you have to talk about past embedding, when you have to talk about an event that is embedded within the given past time, then the past perfect form becomes useful, or that is the function and the meaning that is generated by the forms of perfect past tense.

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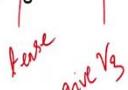
### Structure of the past perfect tense



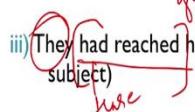
- i) She had returned from the conference. (Affirmative sentence)



- ii) The college had not given the permission to participate in the event. (Negative sentence)



- iii) They had reached home before the parcel arrived. (Plural subject)



We will look at the structure of the perfect past tense. It is important to understand this will help you learn how to form grammatically well coded sentences using the past perfect tense

forms. So, the first example you have here, ‘she had returned from the conference’, an affirmative sentence. Now look at this closely, this is very similar to the one that we just discussed. But if you notice, I have taken off the current past event from here.

So you do not have two events like we discussed in the previous case, but just the first one “she had returned from the conference”, I use the sentence to let you know that it is not necessary that you have the second past even mentioned in the sentence every time you can use the past perfect form even without mentioning the other one, it just the moment you have the had plus the v3 form of the main verb in the sentence it is understood that you are referring to something that is you are referring to an action that has been embedded in the past have some action.

So, let us look at the structure then. We will keep our focus on the verb because we know that is what is important to understand tense. Now, you have had returned, this is important to understand now returned is your main verb in the sentence. And then you have an ‘ed’ suffix attached to it. You also have an additional, auxiliary here which is ‘had’, now this ‘had’ is what is responsible for giving the tense or the time is responsible in referring to the time of the sentence or the time of the action.

So past tense is then represented by the auxiliary had. And what is this ‘ed’ with verb in the simple past tense form we saw that ‘ed’ is the one that could give the past tense form then why is that not the case in the sentence? It is because in perfect aspect, the verb form that you use, is not the simple past tense form, but it is the v3 or what is also referred to as the past participle form of the verb. Keep this in mind. In return in the example we have here, the verb is written in its v3 form, it is the participle form and not the simple past tense form.

Participle forms cannot provide tense; they are incapable of giving tense to the verb. Hence you have another auxiliary that performs the function which is had in the case of past perfect forms. So, had gives you the past tense form acts as the past tense marker, then you have the verb in its participle form. Together, the auxiliary had and the v3 form of the main verb makes the past perfect form in the English language. So, that is about the structure of the past perfect tense we look at two other examples where have we have here to understand it better.

The second one is, “the college had not given the permission to participate in the event”. “Had not given”. So, this is a negative sentence, you will see that the structure does not change at all the only thing that you see here additional is the negation marker, but that does

not bring about any change in the basic structure of the past perfect form here, you have had here as the tense marker, you have given which is ‘give’ in its v3 form, the verb given its participle form is given and together both of them would give you your past perfect form.

Similarly, in the last example, “they had reached home before the parcel arrived”. Everything is the same the only difference that you see here is that you have ‘they’ which is like a plural subject unlike in the previous two cases, you have a plural subject ‘they’ here, but even that has not brought about any change in the structure for past perfect form. It is still the ‘had’, the auxiliary verb had which gives the tense, and then you have the verb ‘reach’, in its participle form as reached. Because it is a regular verb it is taking the ‘ed’ form, otherwise, it would have taken something else, sometimes by undergoing internal change or sometimes by adding some other particle to it, but the basic structure is still the same, which is had followed by the v3 form of the verb. This is the structure of the past perfect tense.

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### Progressive Aspect in the past



- The progressive aspect in the past is used to convey that an action was ongoing in the past.

Eg. Kapil ~~was reading~~ Love in the Time of Cholera by Gabriel Marquez.

*be - past      progressive*



We will move on to talking about the next tense form, which helps us to talk about past tense in English and that is the progressive aspect. Progressive aspect, as the name suggests, it helps you to convey that an action was going on in the past or an action was in continuation was in progress in the past time. It is a very simple aspectual form to understand. Let us look at an example. So, Kapil was reading “Love in the Time of Cholera by Gabriele Marquez”.

So, ‘was reading’, this is your progressive aspect. Progressive aspect of course, is indicated by the ing form, Which is seen along with the main verb read, and then you have the auxiliary verb was which is the past tense form of the verb ‘be’, this is ‘be’ verb in the past. So,

obviously, then this part of the verb is responsible for the supply of tense in the sentence, this is a very simple form of the past tense to understand.

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### Structure of Past progressive tense

i) She was walking back to her lab. (Affirmative sentence)

ii) They were talking about the cultural fest to be held next month. (Plural subject)

iii) She was/They were not living in France back then.



We look at the structure once again and have a clearer understanding of how the form works. So, “she was walking back to her lab”. So, the first one you have here ‘was walking’, “they were talking about the cultural fest to be held next month” plural subject. The only change you see here of the is of the verb here, in the previous case, because your subject was singular, you use the singular form of the verb which is ‘was’, past form of the verb be ‘was’. But, because your subject is singular, you used the singular verb along with it, second case, you use were because your subject is plural now.

So, you use the past form of the verb be in its plural form, which is ‘were’. Besides that, there is no much change in the sentence, which is you still have the ‘ing’ marker in both of it which represent the progressive tense form, progressive aspect form and then ‘was’ and ‘were’ they are supplied tense to the verb, and they are used depending on whether the subject is singular or plural.

The last one is an example of say the negative sentence. So, you have, “she was not living in France back then or they were not living in France back then”. So again, the only difference is that of the verb ‘was’ and ‘were’ because you have a singular subject here and here you have a plural subject. So, the only difference is that rest of it remains the same.

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### Past perfect progressive

- ▶ It is formed by adding the progressive form to the past perfect.
- ▶ It conveys the meaning that a past embedded action was in progress.

Eg. She had been writing a book on climate change before she published her recent work.

- ▶ Certain verbs like enjoy, appreciate, love, understand, and a few others that are indicative of mental processes more commonly use the simple aspect than the progressive.



There is one more way or let us say there is one more form of tense form of past time that helps you talk about it, and that is the past perfect progressive form. As the name suggests, this particular form has two aspects along with its two forms. One is of the perfective aspect in the other of the progressive aspects. So, which means in this form you will see a combination of both the perfect and the progressive forms of the tense in past time. You can look at the example and understand what it means.

So, the meaning usually conveyed by this form of tenses the progressive nature of an embedded action. So, in progressive form it was the progressive nature of the past action given, but then in this case, it is going to talk about the progressive nature of the embedded past action. Let us look at the example “she had been writing a book on climate change before she published her recent work”. So, what is the past perfect progressive form of the verb here is ‘write’ and you have ‘had been writing’. So, this is your past perfect progressive form in English.

So, she had been writing a book of course, like we talked about the embedded event or the embedded past, this is what is your event 1 and published her recent work is your event 2. So, this is your previous past that means, previous past or embedded past you can call it any of the two and so, event 1 is the writing of the book and event 2 is the publishing of the recent book. So, it is the event 1 the previous past event which was in progress and that is the use of the past perfect progressive form. It is the embedded action that is in progress in the past perfect progressive form.

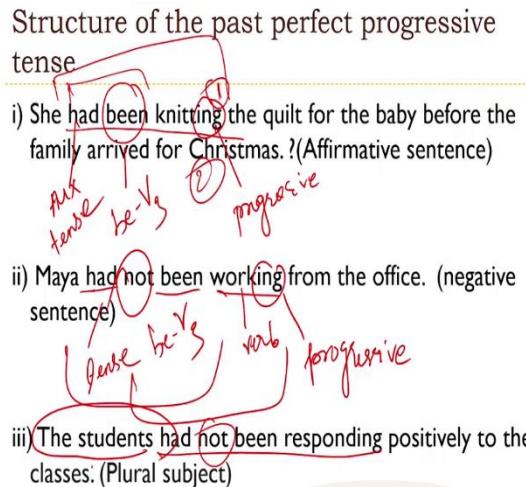
So, this is the understanding. If you understand the past perfect form well then it is not very difficult to understand the past perfect progressive form. All you are doing is you are adding another aspect or another form called the progressive form along with it just to show that that particular action which is the embedded action was in progress in the embedded pass or in the previous past time.

Now, this is very important part that you need to keep in mind while we talk about progressive aspect. This is particularly with respect to the progressive aspects in English, whether of the past tense or the present tense, a progressive aspect and its forms are very heavily dependent on the nature of the verbs used.

Now, what do I mean by that, verbs that represent mental processes, like enjoy or understand or appreciate, these are verbs that represent mental processes. They talk about mental processes. If the verb's nature is of this sense, that is, if the verbs are indicative of mental processes, then usually we do not use them in its progressive forms, which means you should not make a progressive aspect or a progressive form out of verbs that are indicative of mental processes.

In the case of verbs like this, the usually preferred form is that of the simple form. We prefer a simple form when we have to talk about the mental process verbs. So, please avoid using progressive aspects along with the verbs of this kind. This is one important information that you need to keep in mind with respect to the usage of progressive aspect in the English language.

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Now, we look at the structure of the past perfect progressive tense, “she had been knitting the quilt for the baby before the family arrived for Christmas”. So, what do you have is ‘had been knitting’. So, this is of course, your event 1 and the ‘arrival of the families’ event 2. So obviously, this particular action is in the previous past and you have added the progressive aspect to it by adding the ‘ing’ suffix. So, the ing suffix is indicative of the progressive form in this then you have ‘had been’. What has been? been is the v3 form of or the participle form of the verb be, and had as an auxiliary, which is the supplier of tense in this sentence.

So, ‘had’ supplies tense to the main verb of the sentence. This one like I told you, this particular verb ‘be’ cannot do anything because it is in the participle form. So, participle forms do not supply tense. ‘Knitting’ again ‘ing’ is a progressive marker that itself cannot supply any tense, because ‘ing’ is representative of the aspect marker it has got nothing to do with the tense, but the tense is then provided using the auxiliary ‘had’.

So, all of them together, ‘had’ followed by the v3 form of the verb be followed by the main verb in its progressive aspectual form gives you the past perfect progressive. The first two part together, it gives you the perfect form, and then all the three together will give you the past perfect progressive form. Same is the case with the second sentence, the difference again is that this is a negative sentence. So, you have the negation marker not here, but rest of the part of the sentence remains the same.

So, ‘had gives’ you the tense ‘been’ is v3, v3 of ‘be’, this together will give you the perfect form and then you have the main verb ‘work’ and then the ‘ing’ which gives you the progressive aspect marker, it functions as the progressive aspect marker. Both of them together. So ‘had been working’ gives you the past perfect progressive form.

Same for the last sentence ‘the students had not been responding positively to the classes’. This one again you see, this is the part ‘not’ will act as a negation marker rest of the things are same, as you have seen in the sentence 1 and in the sentence 2. Only difference with respect to the grammar here would be that instead of a singular subject, you have used a plural subject like it is indicated in the sentence. So, this is the sum total of how you represent or grammatically encode structurally encode a sentence that is in past perfect progressive form in the English language.

I hope you have understood the various forms and the meanings of the past tense and its uses in the real-life scenario. Please practice all the structural details, especially of how you form the sentences using different past forms in English. This is certainly important. This is one of the most important part of the English grammar or the structure of the English language as we call it, to form good accurate sentences, which helps both in communication and other tasks in English. So, thank you so much, and I will see you again in the next lesson.