

# Understanding Verb Tenses

In grammar, *tense* is the time of a [verb's](#) action or its state of being, such as present (something happening now), past (something happened earlier), or future (something going to happen). These are called the verb's time frame. For example, examine I *walk* (present), I *walked* (past), and I *will walk* (future).

Next, a verb can have an aspect, which gives more formation about the state of the verb's action. They are simple, progressive, perfect, or perfect progressive. *Simple* is covered by the basic present, past, and future tense verb forms. A verb with a simple aspect doesn't necessarily specify if an action is complete or not. For an action that's ongoing or unfinished, you use continuous/progressive tenses. If the action was completed, you use perfect or perfect progressive tenses:

- I walked (simple past)
- I am walking (present continuous, action is ongoing)
- I was walking ([past continuous](#), action continued in the past)
- I will be walking (future continuous, ongoing action will happen later)
- I have walked (present perfect, action is completed)
- I had walked (past perfect, action was completed in the past)
- I will have walked (future perfect, action will be completed in the future)
- I have been walking (present perfect progressive, the current ongoing action is complete)
- I had been walking (past perfect progressive, the action was ongoing in the past and completed in the past)
- I will have been walking (future perfect progressive, ongoing action will be completed in the future)

## Irregular Verbs

Of course, not every verb form in English is as easy as forming regular verbs such as *walk* into its participles of *walking* and *walked*. Take, for example, *go*, which changes to *went* and *gone* in the past:

- I went (simple past)
- I am going (present continuous, action is ongoing)
- I was going (past continuous, action continued in the past)
- I will be going (future continuous, ongoing action will happen later)
- I have gone (present perfect, action is completed)
- I had gone (past perfect, action was completed in the past)

- I will have gone (future perfect, action will be completed in the future)
- I have been going (present perfect progressive, the current ongoing action is complete)
- I had been going (past perfect progressive, the action was ongoing in the past and completed in the past)
- I will have been going (future perfect progressive, ongoing action will be completed in the future)

## Helpers and Conditional Mood

Auxiliary verbs, also called helping verbs, create continuous and perfect tenses; auxiliaries include forms of "to be" or "has," such as in the examples from above:

- I *am/was* walking (continuous)
- I *have/had* walked (perfect)
- I *will* walk (future)

English doesn't have a separate verb form for future tense (like adding an -ed to create a past tense word), just shows it through auxiliary words next to the verbs, such as I *will* walk, I *shall* be walking, or I *am going to* walk.

If something might happen or it might not (conditional), that's the conditional mood (not a separate verb form either), and it also formed with auxiliary verbs, such as *may* or *can*: I *may* walk (present conditional) or I *could* walk (past conditional).

# Verb Tense Chart

Here are simple explanations of the tenses in English that give the most common use of [each tense in English](#). There are a number of exceptions to the rules, other uses for certain tenses in English and so on. Each tense has examples, a link to a page that goes into detail for each tense in English, as well as a [visual tense chart](#) and a quiz to check your understanding.

**[Simple present](#)**: things that happen every day.

*He usually goes for a walk every afternoon.*

*Petra doesn't work in the city.*

*Where do you live?*

**[Simple past](#)**: something that happened at some time in the past.

*Jeff bought a new car last week.*

*Peter didn't go to the meeting yesterday.*

*When did you leave for work?*

**[Present continuous](#)**: what is happening at the moment.

*I'm working at the computer at the moment.*

*He isn't sleeping now.*

*Are you working?*

**[Past continuous](#)**: what was happening at a specific moment in the past.

*I was playing tennis at 7 p.m.*

*She wasn't watching TV when he called.*

*What were you doing at that time?*

**Simple future**: paired with "will" to express a future act.

*She will come to the meeting tomorrow.*

*They won't help you.*

*Will you come to the party?*

**Simple future**: paired with "going to" to indicate future plans.

*I'm going to visit my parents in Chicago next week.*

*Alice isn't going to attend the conference.*

*When are you going to leave?*

**Future continuous**: what will be happening at a specific moment in the future.

*I will be lying on the beach this time next week.*

*She won't be having any fun this time tomorrow.*

*Will you be working this time tomorrow?*

**Present perfect**: something that began in the past and continues into the present.

*Tim has lived in that house for 10 years.*

*She hasn't played golf for long.*

*How long have you been married?*

**Past perfect**: what happened before something else in the past.

*Jack had already eaten when he arrived.*

*I hadn't finished the report when my boss asked for it.*

*Had you spent all your money?*

**Future perfect**: what will have happened up to a point in the future.

*Brian will have finished the report by five o'clock.*

*Susan won't have driven far by the end of the evening.*

*How many years will you have studied by the time you get your degree?*

**Present perfect continuous**: what has been happening up to the present moment in time.

*I've been working for three hours.*

*She hasn't been working in the garden for long.*

*How long have you been cooking?*

**Past perfect continuous**: what had been happening up to a specific moment in the past.

*They had been working for three hours by the time he arrived.*

*We hadn't been playing golf for long.*

*Had you been working hard when he asked for it?*

**Future perfect continuous:** what will be happening up to a specific moment in the future.

*They will have been working for eight hours by the end of the day.*

*She won't have been studying for very long when she takes the test.*

*How long will you have been playing that game by the time you finish?*

## **More Information.**

### **The Debate as to Whether Future Is a Tense**

Many contemporary [linguists](#) equate tenses with the [inflectional](#) categories (or different endings) of a verb, which means that they don't consider the future to be a tense. English maintains an inflectional distinction only between the [present](#) (for example, *laugh* or *leave*) and the [past](#) (*laughed*, *left*). But if you equate "tense" with a time change, then future is indeed a tense.

- **David Crystal**

English...has only one inflectional form to express time: the past tense marker (typically *-ed*), as in *walked*, *jumped*, and *saw*. There is, therefore, a two-way tense contrast in English: *I walk* vs. *I walked*—present tense vs past tense. English has no future tense ending but uses a wide range of other techniques to express future time (such as *will/shall*, *be going to*, *be about to*, and future adverbs). The linguistic facts are uncontroversial. However, people find it extremely difficult to drop the notion of 'future tense' (and related notions, such as imperfect, future perfect, and pluperfect tenses) from their mental vocabulary, and to look for other ways of talking about the grammatical realities of the English verb.

- **Bas Aarts, Sylvia Chalker, and Edmund Weiner**In discussing tense, labels such as present tense, past tense, and future tense are misleading, since the relationship between tense and time is often not one-to-one. Present and past tenses can be used in some circumstances to refer to future

time (e.g. *If he comes tomorrow...*, *If he came tomorrow...*); present tenses can refer to the

- past (as in newspaper headlines, e.g. *Minister resigns...*, and in colloquial narrative, e.g. *So she comes up to me and says...*); and so on.
- In [English grammar](#), *aspect* is a [verb](#) form (or category) that indicates time-related characteristics, such as the completion, duration, or repetition of an action. (Compare and contrast with [tense](#).) When used as an adjective, it's *aspectual*. The word comes from Latin, meaning "how [something] looks"
- The two primary aspects in English are the [perfect](#) (sometimes called *perfective*) and the [progressive](#) (also known as the *continuous* form). As illustrated below, these two aspects may be combined to form the *perfect progressive*.
- In English, aspect is expressed by means of [particles](#), separate verbs, and [verb phrases](#).

## • **Examples and Observations**

### • **Perfect Aspect**

The perfect aspect describes events occurring in the past but linked to a later time, usually the present. The perfect aspect is formed with *has*, *have*, or *had* + the [past participle](#). It occurs in two forms:

#### • [Perfect Aspect, Present Tense:](#)

"History *has remembered* the kings and warriors, because they destroyed; art *has remembered* the people, because they created."

(William Morris, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, 1897)

#### • [Perfect Aspect, Past Tense:](#)

"At fifteen life *had taught* me undeniably that surrender, in its place, was as honorable as resistance, especially if one had no choice."

(Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969)

### • **Progressive Aspect**

The progressive aspect usually describes an event that takes place during a limited time period. The progressive aspect is made up of a form of *be* + the *-ing* form of the [main verb](#).

#### • [Progressive Aspect, Present Tense:](#)

"She's loyal and *is trying* to wear her thin flippy hair in cornrows."

(Carolyn Ferrell, "Proper Library," 1994)

- **Progressive Aspect, Past Tense:**

"I *was reading* the dictionary. I thought it was a poem about everything."

- (Steven Wright)

- **The Difference Between Tense and Aspect**

"Traditionally . . . both aspects [perfect and progressive] are treated as part of the tense system in English, and mention is made of tenses such as the *present progressive* (e.g. *We are waiting*), the *present perfect progressive* (e.g. *We have been waiting*), and the *past perfect progressive* (e.g. *We had been waiting*), with the latter two combining two aspects.

- There is a distinction to be made, however, between tense and aspect. Tense is concerned with how time is encoded in the grammar of English, and is often based on morphological form (e.g. *write, writes, wrote*); aspect is concerned with the unfolding of a situation, and in English is a matter of syntax, using the verb *be* to form the progressive, and the verb *have* to form the perfect. For this reason combinations like those above are nowadays referred to as *constructions* (e.g. the *progressive construction*, the *present perfect progressive construction*)."

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- (Bas Aarts, Sylvia Chalker, and Edmund Weiner, *Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar*, 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2014)

- present perfect progressive: God knows how long *I've been doing it*. ***Have I been talking*** out loud?

- past perfect progressive: He ***had been keeping*** it in a safety deposit box at the Bank of America. For months she ***had been waiting*** for that particular corner location.

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- **Present Perfect Progressive and Past Perfect Progressive**

"The perfect **aspect** most often describes events or states taking place during a preceding time. The progressive aspect describes an event or state of affairs in progress or continuing. Perfect and progressive aspect can be combined with either present or past tense...Verb phrases can be marked for both aspects (perfect and progressive) at the same time: The perfect progressive aspect is rare, occurring usually in the past tense in fiction. It combines the meaning of the perfect and the progressive, referring to a past situation or activity that was in progress for a period of time."

- (Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad, and Geoffrey Leech, *Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Longman, 2002)



In English grammar, verb tenses or forms indicate the moment when something happens, such as the past, present, or future. These three primary forms can be subdivided further to add detail and specificity, such as whether the action is ongoing or to describe the order in which events occurred. For example, the present simple verb tense concerns actions that happen every day, while the past simple verb tense refers to something that happens in the past. In all, there are 13 tenses.

If you want to continue your studies, this [tense table](#) will help you learn more about verb tenses. Educators can find activities and lesson plans in this guide to [teaching tenses](#)

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