**A complete Tense Evaluation in English**

**Talking about the present**

**The simple Present Tense**

We use the [**present simple**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/present-simple) to talk about:

* something that is **true** in the present:

*They* ***live*** *next door to us.  
He* ***works*** *for the Post Office.*

* something that **happens regularly** in the present:

*The children* ***come*** *home from school at about four.  
We often* ***see*** *your brother at work.*

* something that is **always true**:

*Water* ***boils*** *at 100 degrees Celsius.  
The Nile* ***is*** *the longest river in Africa.*

**Continuous aspect- Additional Note**

We use **continuous aspect**:

* for something happening **before and after a specific time**:

*He****'s getting*** *on the train.* (before and after the moment of speaking)  
*It was a quarter past ten. We* ***were watching*** *the news on television.*

* for something happening **before and after another action**:

*Mother* ***will be cooking*** *the dinner when we get home.  
We* ***were waiting*** *for the bus when it started to rain.*

* for something **continuing for some time**:

*Everybody* ***will be waiting*** *for us.  
They* ***had been working*** *hard all day.*

* for something **happening again and again**:

*They****'ve been doing*** *that every day this week.  
The children* ***were always shouting****.  
He* ***will be practising*** *the piano every night.*

* for something **temporary**:

*We* ***are renting*** *an apartment until our house is ready.  
He* ***was working*** *in a garage during the vacation.*

* for something **new**:

*We have moved from Birmingham. We****'re living*** *in Manchester now.  
He had left university and* ***was working*** *in his father's business.*

* to describe something **changing** or **developing**:

*Everything* ***has been getting*** *more difficult.  
He* ***was growing*** *more bad-tempered every day.*

We can use **continuous aspect**:

* with [**perfect aspect**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/perfect-aspect):

*How long* ***have*** *you* ***been******sitting there****?  
I don't know how long she* ***had******been******learning*** *Spanish.*

* with [**modal verbs**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/modal-verbs):

*Your friends* ***will be looking for you****.  
They* ***might******be playing*** *tennis.*

* with both [**modal verbs**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/modal-verbs) and [**perfect aspect**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/perfect-aspect):

*You* ***should have******been******driving*** *more carefully.  
Soon we* ***will have******been******living*** *here for 25 years.*

We do **not** normally use the continuous aspect with [**stative verbs**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/present-continuous). We use the **simple instead:**

*I* ***don't understand*** *you.* (NOT ~~am not understanding~~)  
*When I got home, I really* ***needed*** *a shower.* (NOT ~~was needing~~)  
*I've always* ***liked*** *John.* (NOT ~~been liking~~)

**Present Continuous**

We use the [**present continuous**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/present-continuous) to talk about:

* something happening at the moment of speaking:

*I can't hear you. I'****m listening*** *to a podcast.  
Please be quiet. The children* ***are sleeping****.*

* something happening regularly in the present **before and after a specific time**:

*I****'m*** *usually* ***having*** *breakfast at this time in the morning.  
When I see George he****'s*** *usually* ***reading*** *his Kindle.*

* something in the present which we think is **temporary**:

*Michael is at university. He****'s studying*** *history.  
I love Harry Potter. I****'m reading*** *the last book.*

* something which is **new** and **contrasts** with a previous state:

*Nowadays people* ***are sending*** *text messages instead of phoning.  
I hear you've moved house. Where* ***are you living*** *now?*

* something which is **changing**, **growing** or **developing**:

*The weather* ***is getting*** *colder.  
Our grandchildren* ***are growing up*** *quickly.*

* something which happens **again and again**:

*It****'s always raining*** *in London.  
They* ***are always arguing****.  
George is great. He****'s always laughing****.*

Note that we normally use *always* with this use.

We use [**modal verbs**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/modal-verbs):

* to talk about the present when [**we are not sure**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/probability) of something:

*I don't know where Henry is. He* ***might be playing*** *tennis.  
'Who's knocking at the door?' – 'I don't know. It* ***could be*** *the police.'*

* to talk about things like [ability](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/ability) (*can*) and [obligation](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/suggestions-and-obligations) (*should*):

*I* ***can speak*** *English quite well but I* ***can't speak*** *French at all.  
You* ***should do*** *your homework before you go out.*

**Talking about the past**

**Past tense**

There are two tenses in English – past and present.

The past tense in English is used:

* to talk about the **past**
* to talk about **hypotheses** (when we imagine something)
* for **politeness**.

There are fourpast tense forms in English:

| Past simple: | *I worked* |
| --- | --- |
| Past continuous: | *I was working* |
| Past perfect: | *I had worked* |
| Past perfect continuous: | *I had been working* |

**Past events and situations**

We use the [**past simple**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/past-simple) to talk about:

* something that happened **once in the past**:

*The film* ***started*** *at seven thirty.  
We* ***arrived*** *home before dark.*

* something that **was true for some time in the past**:

*Everybody* ***worked*** *hard through the winter.  
We* ***stayed*** *with our friends in London*

When we talk about something that happened **several times in the past**, we use the **past simple**:

*Most evenings, we* ***stayed*** *at home and watched DVDs.  
Sometimes they* ***went*** *out for a meal.*

or ***used to***:

*Most evenings, we* ***used to stay*** *at home and watch DVDs.  
We* ***used to go for*** *a swim every morning.*

or ***would***:

*Most evenings, he* ***would take*** *the dog for a walk.  
They* ***would*** *often* ***visit*** *friends in Europe.*

We do not normally use *would* with [**stative verbs**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/present-continuous). We use the **past simple** or ***used to*** instead:

*He ~~would~~* ***looked*** *much older than he does now.* (NOT ~~would look~~)  
*We ~~would~~* ***used to feel*** *very cold in winter.* (NOT ~~would feel~~)

**Additional Explanations: Simple Past Tense Note 2**

We use the past tense to talk about:

* something that happened **once in the past**:

*I* ***met*** *my wife in 1983.  
We* ***went*** *to Spain for our holidays.  
They* ***got*** *home very late last night.*

* something that happened **several times in the past**:

*When I was a boy, I* ***walked*** *a mile to school every day.  
We* ***swam*** *a lot while we were on holiday.  
They always* ***enjoyed*** *visiting their friends.*

* something that was **true for some time in the past**:

*I* ***lived*** *abroad for ten years.  
He* ***enjoyed*** *being a student.  
She* ***played*** *a lot of tennis when she was younger.*

* we often use **expressions with *ago*** with the past simple:

*I* ***met*** *my wife* ***a long time ago****.*

**Past simple questions and negatives**

We use ***did*** to make [questions](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/questions-and-negatives) with the past simple:

***Did*** *she* ***play*** *tennis when she was younger?****Did*** *you* ***live*** *abroad?  
When* ***did*** *you* ***meet*** *your wife?  
Where* ***did*** *you* ***go*** *for your holidays?*

But questions with *who* often don't use *did*:

***Who discovered*** *penicillin?****Who wrote*** *Don Quixote?*

We use **didn't** (**did not**) to make [**negatives**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/questions-and-negatives)with the past simple:

*They* ***didn't go*** *to Spain this year.  
We* ***didn't get*** *home until very late last night.  
I* ***didn't see*** *you yesterday.*

**Past simple and hypotheses**

We can also use the past simple to refer to the **present or future in hypotheses** (when we imagine something). See these pages:

**Extra Reading: Simple Past**

We use these forms:

* to talk about the **past**:

*He* ***worked*** *at McDonald's. He* ***had worked*** *there since July.  
He* ***was working*** *at McDonald's. He* ***had been working*** *there since July.*

* to refer to **the present or future in hypotheses**:

*It might be dangerous. Suppose they****got****lost.*

This use is very common in wishes:

***I wish*** *it****wasn't****so cold.*

and in conditions with *if*:

*He could get a new job* ***if*** *he really****tried****.****If*** *Jack****was playing****, they would probably win.*

For hypotheses, wishes and conditions in the past, we use the past perfect:

*It was very dangerous. What if you****had got****lost?  
I wish I****hadn't spent****so much money last month.  
I would have helped him if he****had asked****.*

and also to talk about the present in a few **polite expressions**:

*Excuse me,* ***I was wondering if*** *this was the train for York.****I just hoped****you would be able to help me.*

**Past continuous**

We use the [**past continuous**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/past-continuous):

* for something that **happened before and after a specific time in the past**:

*It was just after ten. I* ***was watching*** *the news on TV.  
At half-time we* ***were losing*** *1–0.*

* for something that **happened before and after another action in the past**:

*He broke his leg when he* ***was playing*** *rugby.  
She saw Jim as he* ***was driving*** *away.*

*It was September. Mary* ***was starting*** *school the next week.  
We were very busy. Our guests* ***were arriving*** *soon and we had to get their room ready.*

The past continuous is made from **the past tense of the verb** [***be***](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/node/1372/) and the [***–ing* form**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/node/1384/) of a verb:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *I* ***was*** *You* ***were*** *He* ***was*** *She* ***was*** *It* ***was*** *We* ***were*** *You* ***were*** *They* ***were*** | *work****ing*** *play****ing*** *liv****ing*** *talk****ing***  etc. |

**We use the past continuous to talk about the**[**past**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/talking-about-the-past)**:**

* for something which **happened before and after** **another action**:

*The children****were doing*** *their homework when I* ***got*** *home.*

Compare: *The children* ***did*** *their homework when* (= after) *I* ***got*** *home.*

This use of the past continuous is very common at the beginning of a story:

*The other day****I was waiting****for a bus when …  
Last week, as* ***I was driving****to work, …*

* for something that **happened before and after** **a specific time**:

*It was* ***eight o'clock****. I* ***was writing*** *a letter.*

Compare: *At eight o'clock I wrote* (= started writing) *some letters*.

* to show that something **continued for some time**:

*My head****was aching****.  
Everyone****was shouting****.*

* for something that **happened again and again**:

*I****was practising****every day, three times a day.  
They****were meeting****secretly after school.  
They****were always quarrelling****.*

* with verbs which show **change or growth**:

*The children****were growing up****quickly.  
Her English****was improving****.  
My hair****was going****grey.  
The town****was changing****quickly.*

We do **not** normally use the past continuous with **stative verbs**.We use the **past simple** instead:

*When I got home, I really* ***needed***(NOT ~~was needing~~) *a shower*.

**Past continuous and hypotheses**

We can also use the past continuous to refer to the**present or future in hypotheses** (when we imagine something). See these pages:

**Perfect aspect**

We use perfect aspect to **look back** from a specific time and talk about things up to that time or about things that are important at that time.

We use the [present perfect](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/present-perfect) to look back from the present:

*I* ***have always enjoyed*** *working in Italy.* [and I still do]  
*She* ***has left*** *home, so she cannot answer the phone.*

We use the [past perfect](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/past-perfect) to look back from a time in the past:

*It was 2006.* ***I had enjoyed*** *working in Italy for the past five years.  
She* ***had left*** *home, so she could not answer the phone.*

We use ***will*** with the [perfect](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/will-have-and-would-have) to look back from a time in the future:

*By next year* ***I will have worked*** *in Italy for 15 years.  
She* ***will have*** *left home by 8.30, so she will not be able to answer the phone.*

**The past in the past – Past Perfect**

We use the [**past perfect**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/past-perfect) when we are **looking back** from a point in the past to something earlier in the past:

*Helen suddenly remembered she* ***had left*** *her keys in the car.  
When we* ***had done*** *all our shopping, we caught the bus home.  
They wanted to buy a new computer, but they* ***hadn't saved*** *enough money.  
They would have bought a new computer if they* ***had saved*** *enough money.*

**Note 2-Past perfect**

The past perfect is made from the verb ***had*** and the [**past participle**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/verbs)of a verb:

*I* ***had finished*** *the work.  
She* ***had gone****.*

The past perfect **continuous** is made from ***had been*** and the [**-*ing*****form**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/ing-forms) of a verb:

*I****had been****work****ing****there for a year.  
They* ***had been****paint****ing*** *the bedroom.*

The past perfect is used in the same way as the [present perfect](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/present-perfect), but it refers to a time in the past, not the present. We use the past perfect:

* for something that **started in the past** and **continued up to a given time in the past**:

*When George died, he and Anne* ***had been married*** *for nearly fifty years.  
She didn't want to move. She* ***had lived*** *in Liverpool all her life.*

For this use, we often use the past perfect continuous:

*She didn't want to move. She* ***had been living*** *in Liverpool all her life.  
Everything was wet. It* ***had been raining*** *for hours.*

* for something that **happened several times before a point in the past** and **continued after that point**:

*He was a wonderful guitarist. He* ***had been playing*** *ever since he was a teenager.  
He* ***had written*** *three books and he was working on another one.*

* when we are **reporting our experience up to a point in the past**:

*My eighteenth birthday was the worst day I* ***had*** *ever* ***had.*** *I was pleased to meet George. I* ***hadn’t met*** *him before, even though I* ***had met*** *his wife several times.*

* for something that **happened in the past** and **is important at a later time in the past**:

*I couldn't get into the house. I* ***had lost****my keys.  
Teresa wasn't at home. She* ***had gone****shopping.*

We often use **expressions with *for* and *since*** with the past perfect:

*I was sorry when the factory closed. I* ***had worked*** *there****for ten years****.   
I* ***had been watching*** *that programme every week****since it started****, but I missed the last episode.*

We do **not** normally use the past perfect continuous with [**stative verbs**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/present-continuous). We use the **past perfect simple** instead:

*Up until that moment, I'****d*** *never* ***believed***(NOT ~~been believing~~) *in astrology.*

**Past perfect and hypotheses**

**Extra Reading- Past perfect**

We use the **past perfect**:

* for something that **started in the past** and **continued up to a later time in the past**:

*When George died, he and Anne****had been married****for nearly 50 years.  
She didn't want to move. She****had lived****in Liverpool all her life.*

* when we are reporting **our experience up to a point in the past**:

*My eighteenth birthday was the worst day I* ***had*** *ever* ***had****.  
I was pleased to meet George. I* ***hadn't met*** *him before, even though I* ***had met*** *his wife several times.*

* for something that **happened in the past** and **is important at a later time in the past**:

*I couldn't get into the house. I* ***had lost****my keys.  
Teresa wasn't at home. She* ***had gone****shopping.*

We use the **past perfect continuous** to show that something **started in the past** and **continued up to a time in the past** or **was important at that time in the past**:

*Everything was wet. It* ***had been raining*** *for hours.  
He was a wonderful guitarist. He* ***had been playing*** *ever since he was a teenager*

**The past and the present- Present Perfect**

We use the [**present perfect**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/present-perfect):

* for something that **started in the past** and **continues in the present**:

*We* ***have lived*** *here since 2017.* [and we still live here]  
*I* ***have been working*** *at the university for over ten years.*

* for something that **happened in the past** but is **important in the present**:

*I can't open the door. I****'ve left*** *my keys in the car.  
Jenny* ***has found*** *a new job. She works in a supermarket now.*

| **Be careful!** |
| --- |
| We do not use the present perfect with [**adverbials**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/adverbials-of-time) **which refer to a finished past time**:   |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | *yesterday* | *last week/month/year* | *in 2010* | *when I was younger* etc. |   *I* ***have seen*** *that film* ***~~yesterday~~****. We* ***have*** *just* ***bought*** *a new car* ***~~last week~~****.* ***~~When we were children~~*** *we* ***have been*** *to California.*  but we can use the present perfect with **adverbials which refer to a time which is not yet finished**:   |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | *today* | *this morning/week/year* | *now that I am eighteen*etc. |   *Have you seen Helen* ***today****? We have bought a new car* ***this week****.* |

**Note 2- Present perfect**

We use the **present perfect**:

* for something **that started in the past** and **continues in the present**:

*They'****ve been married*** *for nearly 50 years.  
She* ***has lived*** *in Liverpool all her life.*

* when we are talking about our **experience up to the present**:

*I****'ve seen*** *that film before.  
I****'ve played*** *the guitar ever since I was a teenager.  
He* ***has written*** *three books and he is working on another one.*

* for something that **happened in the past** but is **important in the present**:

*I can't get in the house. I****'ve lost*** *my keys.  
Teresa isn't at home. I think she* ***has gone*** *shopping.*

We normally use the **present perfect continuous** to **emphasise that something is still continuing in the present**:

*It****'s been raining*** *for hours.  
I'm tired out. I****'ve been working*** *all day.*

**The future in the past**

When we talk about the **future from a time in the past** we use:

* ***would*** as the past tense of *will*:

*He thought he* ***would buy*** *one the next day.  
Everyone was excited. The party* ***would be*** *fun.*

* ***was/were going to***:

*John* ***was going to drive*** *and Mary* ***was going to follow*** *on her bicycle.  
It was Friday. We* ***were going to set off*** *the next day.*

**The past with modal verbs**

[***could***](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/can-and-could)is the past tense of *can*:

You ***could get*** a good meal for a pound when I was a boy.

[***would***](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/will-and-would) is the past tense of *will*:

*He said he* ***would come*** *but he forgot.*

We use ***may have***, ***might have*** and ***could have*** to show that something has possibly happened in the past:

*I'll telephone him. He* ***might have got home*** *early.  
She's very late. She* ***could have missed*** *her train.*

We use ***should have*** as the past form of *should*:

*I didn't know he was ill. He* ***should have told*** *me.*  
*You* ***shouldn't have spent*** *so much money.*

We use ***would have*** and ***could have*** to talk about something that was possible in the past but did **not** happen:

*I* ***could have gone*** *to Mexico for my holiday but it was too expensive.  
I* ***would have*** *called you, but I had forgotten my phone.  
They* ***would have*** *gone out if the weather had been better.*

**Modals with the perfect**

We use [*will* with the perfect](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/will-have-and-would-have) to show that something **will be complete** at or before some time in the future:

*In a few years they* ***will have discovered*** *a cure for the common cold.  
I can come out tonight. I****'ll have finished*** *my homework by then.*

We use [*would* with the perfect](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/will-have-and-would-have) to refer to something that **did not happen** in the **past**:

*If you had asked me, I* ***would have helped*** *you.  
I* ***would have helped*** *you, but you didn't ask me.  
You didn't ask me or I* ***would have helped*** *you.*

We use **other** [modals with the perfect](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/modals-with-have)whenwe are looking back from a point in time. The point of time may be in the **future**:

*We'll meet again next week. We* ***might have finished*** *the work by then.  
I will phone at six o'clock. He* ***should have got home*** *by then.*

or the **present**:

*It's getting late. They* ***should have arrived*** *by now.  
He's still not here. He* ***must have missed*** *his train.*

or the **past**:

*I wasn't feeling well. I* ***must have eaten*** *something bad.  
I checked my mobile phone. She* ***could have left*** *a message.*

**Talking about the future**

**Level: intermediate**

When we **know about the future**, we normally use the **present tense**.

1. We use the [**present simple**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/present-simple) for something **scheduled**:

*We* ***have*** *a lesson next Monday.  
The train* ***arrives*** *at 6.30 in the morning.  
The holidays* ***start*** *next week.  
It****'s*** *my birthday tomorrow.*

2. We can use the [**present continuous**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/present-continuous) for **plans or arrangements**:

*I****'m playing*** *football tomorrow.  
They* ***are coming*** *to see us tomorrow.  
We****'re having*** *a party at Christmas.*

3. We use [***will***](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/will-and-would):

* when we express beliefs about the future:

*It* ***will be*** *a nice day tomorrow.  
I think Brazil* ***will win*** *the World Cup.  
I'm sure you* ***will enjoy*** *the film.*

* to mean ***want to*** or ***be willing to***:

*I hope you* ***will come*** *to my party.  
George says he* ***will help*** *us.*

* to **make offers and promises** :

*I****'ll*** *see you tomorrow.  
We****'ll send*** *you an email.*

* to **talk about offers and promises**:

*Tim* ***will be*** *at the meeting.  
Mary* ***will help*** *with the cooking.*

4. We use ***be going to***:

* to talk about **plans or intentions**:

*I****'m going to drive*** *to work today.  
They* ***are going to move*** *to Manchester.*

* to make **predictions** based on **evidence** we can see:

*Be careful!* ***You are going to fall****.*(= I can see that you might fall.)  
*Look at those black clouds. I think* ***it's going to rain****.*(= I can see that it will rain.)

5. We use [***will be* with an *-ing* form**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/ing-forms) for something happening before and after **a specific time in the future**:

*I****'ll be working******at eight o'clock****. Can you come later?  
They****'ll be waiting*** *for you* ***when you arrive****.*

6. We can use ***will be* with an *-ing* form** instead of the present continuous or ***be going to*** when we are talking about **plans, arrangements and intentions**:

*They****'ll be coming*** *to see us next week.  
I****'ll be driving*** *to work tomorrow.*

7. We often use **verbs like** ***would like, plan, want, mean, hope, expect*** to talk about the future:

*What are you going to do next year? I****'d like to go*** *to university.  
We* ***plan to go*** *to France for our holidays.  
George* ***wants to buy*** *a new car.*

8. We use [**modals**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/modal-verbs) ***may***, ***might*** and ***could*** when we are **not sure** about the future:

*I* ***might stay*** *at home tonight or I* ***might go*** *to the cinema.  
We* ***could see*** *Mary at the meeting. She sometimes goes.*

9. We can use ***should*** if we think there's a **good chance** of something happening:

*We* ***should be*** *home in time for tea.  
The game* ***should be*** *over by eight o'clock.*

**The future in** [**time clauses and *if-*clauses**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/verbs-in-time-clauses-and-if-clauses)

In time clauses with words like *when, after, until* we often use **present tense forms** to talk about the future:

*I'll come home* ***when I finish*** *work.  
You must wait here* ***until your father comes****.  
They are coming* ***after they have had*** *dinner.*

In clauses with *if* we often use **present tense forms** to talk about the future:

*We won't be able to go out* ***if it is raining****.****If Barcelona lose*** *tomorrow, they will be champions.*

| **Be careful!** |
| --- |
| We do **not** normally use *will* in time clauses and *if-*clauses:  *I'll come home when I* ***finish work****.* (NOT ~~will finish work~~) *We won’t be able to go out if it****rains****.*(NOT ~~will rain~~)  but we can use *will* if it means *want to* or *be willing to*:  *I will be very happy if you* ***will come*** *to my party. We should finish the job early if George* ***will help*** *us.* |

**Wishes and hypotheses**

**Level: intermediate**

**Wishes**

We use the verb ***wish*** or the phrase ***if only*** to talk about things which we want but which are not possible:

***I wish*** *I could see you next week.****If only*** *we could stop for a drink.****I wish*** *we had a bigger house.  
They are always busy.* ***If only*** *they had more time.  
John was very lazy at school. Now* ***he wishes*** *he had worked harder.*

We use *wish* and *if only* with [**past tense forms**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/past-tense):

* We use past tense [**modals**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/modal-verbs)***would*** and ***could*** to talk about **wishes for the future**:

*I don't like my work.* ***I wish I could*** *get a better job.  
That's a dreadful noise.* ***I wish it would*** *stop.  
I always have to get home early.* ***If only my parents would*** *let me stay out later.*

* We use [**past simple**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/past-simple) and [**continuous**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/past-continuous) to talk about **wishes for the present**:

*I don't like this place.* ***I wish I lived*** *somewhere more interesting.  
These seats are very uncomfortable.* ***I wish we were travelling*** *first class.****I wish I was*** *taller.****John wishes he wasn't*** *so busy.  
I'm freezing.* ***If only it wasn't*** *so cold.*

* After *I/he/she/it*, we can use ***were* instead of *was***:

***I wish I was/were*** *taller.****John wishes he wasn't/weren't*** *so busy.  
I'm freezing.* ***If only it wasn't/weren't*** *so cold.*

* We use the [**past perfect**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/past-perfect) to talk about **wishes for the past**:

***I wish I had worked*** *harder when I was at school.****Mary wishes she had listened*** *to what her mother told her.****I wish I hadn’t spent*** *so much money last month.*

Extra Reading

**'to'-infinitives**

**Level: beginner**

**Verbs with *to-*infinitives**

We use the *to*-infinitive **after certain verbs** ([**verbs followed by *to-*infinitive**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/verbs-followed-by-the-infinitive)), particularly verbs of **thinking** and **feeling**:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *choose decide expect forget* | *hate hope intend learn* | *like love mean plan* | *prefer remember want would like/love* |

*They* ***decided to*** *start a business together.****Remember to*** *turn the lights off.*

and verbs of **saying**:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *agree* | *promise* | *refuse* | *threaten* |

*We* ***agreed to*** *meet at the cinema.****Promise to*** *call me every day.*

Some verbs are followed by a **direct object** and then the *to-*infinitive:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *advise ask encourage expect* | *intend invite order persuade* | *remind tell want warn* | *would like/love would prefer* |

*He encouraged* ***his friends to*** *vote for him.****Remind me*** *to give Julia a call.*

**Infinitive of purpose**

We also use the *to-*infinitive **to express purpose** (to answer *why?*):

*He bought some flowers* ***to give*** *to his wife.  
He locked the door* ***to keep*** *everyone out.*

We can also express purpose with ***in order to*** and ***in order not to***:

*We started our journey early* ***in order to*** *avoid the traffic.  
They spoke quietly* ***in order not to*** *wake the children.*

or ***so as to*** and ***so as not to***:

*We started our journey early* ***so as to*** *avoid the traffic.  
They spoke quietly* ***so as not to*** *wake the children.*

[Infinitive of purpose 1](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/to-infinitives)

[Infinitive of purpose 2](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/to-infinitives)

**Level: intermediate**

**Adjectives with *to-*infinitives**

We use the *to-*infinitive after certain [adjectives](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/adjectives):

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *able unable anxious* | *due eager keen* | *likely unlikely ready* | *prepared willing unwilling* |

*Unfortunately, I was* ***unable to work*** *for over a week.  
I'm really tired. I'm* ***ready to go*** *to bed.*

Sometimes the *to-*infinitive **gives a reason** for the adjective:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *amazed delighted disappointed* | *glad happy pleased* | *proud relieved sad* | *sorry surprised unhappy* |

*We were* ***happy to come*** *to the end of our journey.*  
(= We were happy because we had come to the end of our journey.)  
*John was* ***surprised to see*** *me.*  
(= He was surprised because he saw me.)

We often use *it + be* followed by an adjective to give opinions:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *clever difficult easy* | *foolish hard kind* | *nice possible impossible* | *right wrong silly* |

*It's* ***easy to play*** *the piano, but it's very* ***difficult to play*** *well.  
He spoke so quickly that it was* ***impossible to understand*** *him.*

We use the *to-*infinitive with these adjectives to give opinions about people:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *clever foolish* | *kind nice* | *right wrong* | *silly* |

*She was* ***right to complain*** *about that hotel.  
You were* ***clever to find*** *the answer so quickly.*

We use the preposition ***for*** to show who these adjectives refer to:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *difficult* | *easy* | *hard* | *possible* | *impossible* |

*It was* ***difficult for us******to hear*** *what she was saying.  
It is* ***easy******for you******to criticise*** *other people.*

With the other adjectives, we use **the preposition *of***:

*It's* ***kind of you to help****.  
It would be* ***silly******of him******to spend*** *all his money.*

**Nouns with *to-*infinitives**

We use the *to-*infinitive as a **postmodifier** (see [**noun phrases**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/noun-phrases)) after **abstract nouns** like:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *ability attempt chance* | *desire failure need* | *opportunity refusal wish* |

*They gave him* ***an opportunity to escape****.  
He was annoyed by* ***her refusal to answer****.  
I have* ***no desire to be*** *rich.  
There is* ***no need to shout****.*

We often use the *to***-**infinitive as a postmodifier after [**indefinite pronouns**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/node/1294/):

*When I am travelling I always take* ***something to read****.  
I was all alone. I had* ***no one to talk to****.  
There is hardly* ***anything to do*** *in most of these small towns.*

**Hypotheses (things we imagine)**

**Expressions**

When we are talking about hypotheses, we use expressions like:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *what if ... ?* | *in case* | *suppose (that)* | *supposing (that)* | *imagine (if/that)* |

We use these expressions:

* with [**present tense forms**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/present-tense) to talk about the [**present**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/talking-about-the-present) or [**future**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/talking-about-the-future) if we think something is **likely** to be true or to happen:

*We should phone them* ***in case they are*** *lost.  
Those steps are dangerous.* ***Suppose someone has*** *an accident.*

* with [**past tense forms**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/past-tense) to talk about the [**present**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/talking-about-the-present)or [**future**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/talking-about-the-future) to suggest something is **not likely** to be true or to happen:

***Imagine you won*** *the lottery. What would you do with the money?****What if he lost*** *his job? What would happen then?*

* with the [**past perfect**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/past-perfect)to talk about things in the [**past**](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/talking-about-the-past)which **did not happen**:

***Suppose you hadn't passed*** *your exams. What would you have done?****What if he had lost*** *his job? What would his wife have said?*

**Modal verbs**

We use [modals](https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/modal-verbs) ***would*** *and* ***could***for a **hypothesis** about the **present or future**:

*We can't all stay in a hotel.* ***It would be*** *very expensive.  
Drive carefully or* ***you could have*** *an accident.*

We use ***would* in the main clause** and the **past tense in a subordinate clause** for a **hypothesis** about the **present or future**:

***I would*** *always* ***help*** *someone* ***who*** *really* ***needed*** *help.****I would*** *always* ***help*** *someone* ***if they*** *really* ***needed*** *it.*

We use **modals with *have*** to talk about something that **did not happen** in the **past**:

*I didn't see Mary, or I* ***might have spoken*** *to her.  
It's a pity Jack wasn't at the party.* ***He would have enjoyed*** *it.  
Why didn't you ask me?* ***I could have told*** *you the answer.*

We use ***would have* in the main clause** and the **past perfect in a subordinate clause** to talk about something that **did not happen** in the **past**:

***I would have helped*** *anyone* ***who had asked*** *me.****I would have helped*** *you* ***if you had asked*** *me.*

References

https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/talking-about-the-past

https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/talking-about-the-present

https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/talking-about-the-future

https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/wishes-and-hypotheses

https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/perfect-aspect

https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/continuous-aspect

https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/to-infinitives

**Narrative tenses**

Narrative tenses are verb tenses that are used to talk about the past. They are often found in stories and descriptions of past events, such as personal anecdotes.

Example  
The following are examples of narrative tenses:  
Past simple - 'We left on a rainy day' Past continuous - 'It was pouring down even at midday' Past perfect - 'It had rained off and on for ten days' Past perfect continuous - 'We had been waiting to escape for what seemed ages'

**Level: beginner**

With most verbs, the past tense is formed by adding *–ed*:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *call****ed*** | *lik****ed*** | *want****ed*** | *work****ed*** |

But there are a lot of irregular past tense forms in English. Here are the most common irregular verbs in English, with their past tense forms:

| **Base form** | **Past tense** |
| --- | --- |
| *be begin break bring buy build choose come cost cut do draw drive eat feel find get give go have hear hold keep know leave lead let lie lose make mean meet pay put run say sell send set sit speak spend stand take teach tell think understand wear win write* | *was/were began broke brought bought built chose came cost cut did drew drove ate felt found got gave went had heard held kept knew left led let lay lost made meant met paid put ran said sold sent set sat spoke spent stood took taught told thought understood wore won wrote* |

In the classroom  
Activities used to practise narrative tenses include **gap fills**, dictations, story writing and reading, ordering jumbled text, and re-writing events starting at the end.

Further links:  
<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/your-year-review>  
<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/telling-a-story>  
<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/alien-abduction>  
<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/creative-group-writing>  
<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/catch-a-thief-past-simple-past-continuous-practice>

https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/narrative-tenses