

Using tenses

Tenses in English differ slightly from French, so it is vital to understand the nuances they convey. This chapter will remind you how to use the various tenses and give you useful tips to bear in mind when choosing the appropriate tense.

1. Which tenses will we be talking about?

We will just mention the most common tenses here. If you have questions about other tenses you have heard or read, ask your teacher for more information.

- I. Present tenses
 - a. Present simple
 - b. Present continuous
- II. Present perfect tenses
 - c. Present perfect simple
 - d. Present perfect continuous
- III. Past tenses
 - e. Past simple
 - f. Past continuous
- IV. Future tenses
 - g. Future simple
 - h. Future continuous
 - i. Be going to
 - j. Use of present simple as future tense
- V. Future perfect
 - k. Future perfect simple
 - l. Future perfect continuous
- VI. Conditional tenses
 - m. Zero conditional
 - n. Type 1 conditional
 - o. Type 2 conditional
 - p. Type 3 conditional

I. Present tenses

General	Used to speak about an ongoing event or something that is applicable to the present time.
Present simple	➤ Facts that are true in the present context <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ I am a student.✓ I live in Liège.
Infinitive form (+ 's' in the 3 rd person singular)	

<p>Example:</p> <p>I eat You eat (s)he eats We eat They eat</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Habit (usually used with an adverb of frequency such as <i>usually, often, always, never, sometimes</i>, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I often drink tea. ➤ Facts that are always true <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ There are 7 days in a week. ✓ A triangle has three sides. ➤ Fixed facts in the future <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The first class is at 9 on Monday. ✓ The bus leaves the university at 7pm. ➤ Certain verbs are always used in the present simple in correct English (although you may hear them used in the continuous in more informal language) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I love football. ✓ I really like that teacher. ✓ I hate maths!
<p>Present continuous</p> <p>Present tense of 'be' + -ing</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>I am eating You are eating (s)he is eating We are eating They are eating</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Used to discuss what is happening at the moment (often used with <i>now, at the moment</i>, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I can't talk now, I'm finishing my report. ✓ I'm just e-mailing a friend at the moment. ✓ Where are we? We're sitting in the canteen, waiting for you! ➤ Temporary facts; facts that are true at the moment but will change (often used with <i>now, at the moment</i>, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I'm working in the local supermarket for the summer before going back to university. ➤ An appointment or scheduled event in the future <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ We're meeting at 4pm outside the shop. ✓ He's playing in the match tonight.

II. Present perfect

General	This tense is used to talk about an action which began in the past, but which still has some sort of consequence or effect in the present.
Present perfect simple	➤ An action which began in the past but is still linked to the present.

<p>Have / has + past participle</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>I have eaten / I have played You have eaten / you have played (s)he has eaten / (s)he has played We have eaten / we have played They have eaten / they have played</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ She has eaten all the chocolate (<i>She ate it in the past, but her action is still important because there is none left in the present</i>) ➤ Often, it is used with <i>just, already, ever, since, for, how many</i>, etc. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I've only just arrived, I haven't even had time to unpack yet! ✓ I've already eaten, so you don't need to prepare lunch (<i>I ate in the past, but I'm still full in the present</i>). ➤ You can also use this tense to say that it is still possible to repeat the action. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I've been to the USA twice (<i>and I might go again at some point in the future</i>). ➤ The emphasis in this tense is always on the <u>result of the activity</u>. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I've opened the window to get some air (<i>result = there is air in the room</i>). ✓ They've already left, I'm afraid (<i>result = they are no longer here</i>).
<p>Present perfect continuous</p> <p>Have been / has been + -ing</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>I have been eating / playing You have been eating / playing (s)he has been eating / playing We have been eating / playing They have been eating / playing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ This tense is also used to talk about actions which began in the past but which have a consequence in the present; the main difference with the present perfect simple is that here, the emphasis is on the <u>duration of the activity</u>, or <u>on the activity itself</u>, not necessarily the result. It is, therefore, usually accompanied by <i>how long, since, for</i>, etc. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I have been working on this paper for hours! (<i>The emphasis is on the duration and on the fact of having worked; the paper itself is not the most important element</i>). ✓ They have been writing to one another for 10 years now. ✓ She has been trying to get back with her ex-boyfriend, but he isn't interested.

III. Past

General	This tense is used when talking about completed actions that occurred in the past.
Past simple	➤ A completed action in the past.

<p>Regular = infinitive + -ed Irregular forms => vary!</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>I ate / I played You ate / you played (s)he ate / played We ate / played They ate / played</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I finished the exam and left the room. ➤ If you mention a time in the past, e.g. yesterday, last year, this morning, etc., you will need to use the past tense. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Last night I watched a film. ✓ Dinosaurs became extinct millions of years ago. ✓ I went to New York last summer. ✓ I went to China when I was 18. ➤ A habit in the past <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I had horse-riding lessons when I was a child.
<p>Past continuous</p> <p>Was / were + - ing</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>I was eating / I was playing You were eating / you were playing (s)he was eating / (s)he was playing We were eating / we were playing They were eating / they were playing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ An action that was in the process of taking place; it is usually used when another action is mentioned as having interrupted the action in the past continuous. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I was eating dinner when the phone rang. ✓ I was writing an e-mail when my computer suddenly shut down.

IV. Future

General	The future tense is, of course, used to talk about events which are yet to occur; these may be planned events or predictions.
<p>Future simple</p> <p>Will + infinitive (shall + infinitive)</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>I will eat/play You will eat / play (s)he will eat / play We will eat / play They will eat / play</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Neutral future tense ➤ Instantaneous decisions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I'll have a cup of tea while I'm waiting. ✓ I'll have the fish and chips, please. ➤ Promises or threats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I'll phone the police if you do not leave my premises immediately! ✓ I will do my best to complete it on time. ➤ Requests or offers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ We will give you £50 for that phone. ➤ With certain verbs such as <i>think</i>, <i>wonder</i>, <i>be sure</i>, etc. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I wonder if I'll ever finish this report!

	➤ ('Shall' is used in the same way but is more formal than 'will'. It is often used in legal documents and contexts, and is only really used in the first person).
Future progressive	➤ An action that will be taking place at a given time in the future ✓ I can't meet you at 7, I'll still be driving home then.
Be going to + infinitive	➤ A prediction based on evidence ✓ Judging by the clouds, it's going to rain later today. ➤ An intention ✓ I'm going to leave soon, I have a flight to catch! ✓ I'm going to e-mail him to make sure he hasn't forgotten our meeting.
Present simple	➤ A scheduled event; a timetable or agenda ✓ My plane leaves at 9:40. ✓ The film starts at 8:30, so we'll have to be at the cinema by 8:15.

V. Future anterior

General	The future anterior is used to talk about actions that will be complete or finished at a given moment in the future.
<p>Future anterior simple</p> <p>Will have + past participle</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>I will have eaten / played You will have eaten / played (s)he will have eaten / played We will have eaten / played They will have eaten / played</p>	<p>➤ An action that will be finished at a certain moment</p> <p>✓ I can meet you at 8pm, I will have finished my meeting by then.</p> <p>✓ I will have read the book by Friday, so you can ask me any questions you may have about it then.</p>
<p>Future anterior continuous</p> <p>Will have + been + -ing</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>I will have been eating / playing You will have been eating / playing (s)he will have been eating / playing We will have been eating / playing</p>	<p>➤ At a given moment in the future, the action will be partially complete; the speaker wishes to emphasise the duration of the activity rather than the result</p> <p>✓ If you arrive at 8pm, I will have already been playing for an hour, I'll be exhausted!</p>

They will have been eating / playing	
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VI. Conditional (present and past)

General	Conditional tenses are used to talk about hypothetical events; these may be events that might occur in the future, but they can also be events that could have occurred in the past under different conditions. As a general rule, they are used with 'if' in English.
Zero conditional Present clause + present clause	<p>➤ The time being referred to is the present (now), and the hypothetical action is real; often used with general truth.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ If you heat water sufficiently, it boils. ✓ If you drive under the influence of alcohol, you are more likely to have an accident.
Type 1 conditional If + present simple clause + future simple clause	<p>➤ If certain conditions are met, this event will occur</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ If it rains tonight, the roads will be slippery tomorrow morning. ✓ If he leaves the house later than 9:30, he will miss his flight.
Type 2 conditional If + Past + conditional	<p>➤ This conditional is used to refer to unreal events; in other words, the condition is hypothetical, and the result is probable (not necessarily certain).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ If I had enough money, I would buy a house in the countryside. ✓ If I knew the answer, I wouldn't ask the question! ✓ If I met him in real-life, I would probably faint!
Type 3 conditional If + Past perfect + conditional perfect	<p>➤ This tense refers to a time in the past and it is used to express the opposite of reality (the opposite of what actually happened).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ If I had studied more when I was at school, I would have been a millionaire by now. ✓ If we had left on time, we would have been at the hotel by now.