

GRAMMAR

# Narrative tenses

**LEVEL**

Upper-Intermediate  
(B2)

**NUMBER**

EN\_B2\_1122G

**LANGUAGE**

English

## Learning outcomes

- I can identify the narrative tenses in English and distinguish between their uses.
- I can write a short story using the narrative tenses.



# Past simple

- The most commonly used tense to tell a story is the **past simple**.
- We use it for events that happen **one after the other**.

## Examples

Tina **got** out of bed, **walked** to the bathroom and **turned on** the shower.

Sam **opened** the door slowly, **looked** carefully around the room and **walked** in.



**Past simple**

verb + *-ed*

# Past simple and past continuous

- We often see the **past simple** with the **past continuous**.
- The past continuous tells us what was **going on in the background** when **something else happened** (past simple).

## Examples

Kathy **was sitting** on the sofa when the phone **rang**. She **sighed** and **got** up to answer it.

I **was** happily **reading** my book when a man **tapped** me on my shoulder.



**Past simple**  
verb + *-ed*



**Past continuous**  
*was / were* + *-ing* form

# Read the short story

Find examples of the **past simple** and **past continuous**.

My friend Katie and I were walking to the cinema one evening when all of a sudden we heard a strange whirring sound in the distance. Katie looked up and screamed at the top of her lungs. 'Look!' she shrieked, 'there's a flying saucer in the sky!' I turned around and looked to where she was pointing. Katie was shaking with excitement, but all I could do was laugh. 'Katie!' I giggled, 'that's not a real UFO! It's a toy my neighbour built. He's always flying it around the park by my house at night. It *is* scarily realistic, though!'







# Complete the sentences

**Finish** each sentence using a verb in the past simple. **Be** creative!

I was walking  
to work  
when...

She was sitting  
on the sofa  
when...

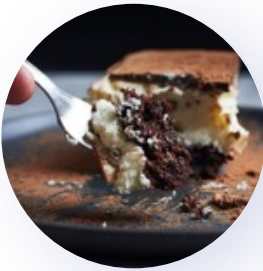
It was pouring  
down with  
rain...

They were  
waiting for the  
bus when...



# Past perfect simple

- We use the **past perfect simple** for an event that happened **before** another event in the past. We often use it together with the **past simple**.



They **had eaten** all the cake by the time we **arrived**.

Jenny **had** already **left** the house when the children **woke up** in the morning.



**Past perfect simple**  
*had + past participle*

# Past perfect continuous

- We use the **past perfect continuous** to describe an action that **started in the past** and then **continued up to another point in the past**.



She **had been waiting** for her brother for over an hour until he finally arrived.

I **had been living** in Brazil for 10 years when I decided to move back to the UK.



**Past perfect continuous**

*had + been + -ing form*





# Read the short story

Find examples of **past tenses**.

Adrian was feeling nervous. He had never planned a birthday party before, let alone a surprise party for his mother, and the day had finally arrived! He wondered if, thanks to his terrible attempts at hiding the secret, she had already figured out the surprise. After all, she had been asking him for weeks if he had organised anything for her! She had never had such a big celebration for her birthday before and Adrian wanted to make sure that everything went smoothly. It was sure to be an evening to remember!





# Finish off the sentences

Use the past perfect simple in your answer.

1 By the time I turned 10 years old,...



...**I had lived** in three different countries

2 By lunchtime yesterday,...



3 By the time we arrived at the party,...



4 Before I joined this class,...



5 Until two years ago,...



6 Before my current job,....



# What had happened?

1. **Describe** what happened in this meeting in **four** sentences.
2. **Re-read** your sentences. **Include** at least **one example** of each past tense.

1 Julia was presenting...

2 Then all of a sudden, Bill interrupted her...

3 He had been... throughout the meeting...

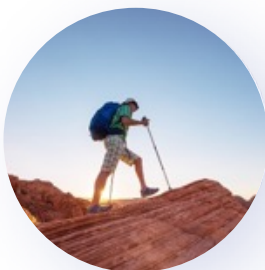
4 She had already ... so she....





# Narrative tenses

- We often use all **four tenses** together when telling a story.
- The tenses help **order** the events. Can you **order** the events below?



Tiffany was tired. She had been walking for a long time. Her father had warned her last week that it was a long route, but she hadn't listened. Suddenly, she saw something in front of her. It was a cliff!

Mark sat down in the living room and sighed. He had been worrying about Priscilla all day. Yesterday, she had left a note, saying she had told everyone his secret. It was now only a matter of time before everyone knew.





# Writing practice

1. **Write** a short story (≈100 words) using the narrative tenses.
2. **Read** your story to a partner in **breakout rooms**. **Check** your tense use.
3. **Share** your story with the rest of the class.

## Some story ideas

A trip to remember

A first week at a job

An eventful 30<sup>th</sup> birthday party

A dangerous walk in the woods



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Your story can be **real** or **fictional**!





# End of the lesson

Idiom

***once upon a time***

**Meaning:** used at the beginning of a story to mean 'a long time ago'

**Example:** **Once upon a time**, there was a prince and princess...



# Additional practice



# Match the tense with the explanation

Past simple

Past continuous

Past perfect simple

Past perfect continuous

- A** We use this tense to **set the scene** in a story or for **actions in progress** at a particular point in time.
- B** We use this tense to talk about **longer continuous actions that started earlier in the past** than the main events of the story.
- C** We use this tense to talk about **an earlier past**: events which happened before the main event.
- D** We use this tense to talk about **the main events in chronological order**.



# Fill in the gaps

**Choose** the correct form of the verb in parentheses.

Last month I \_\_\_\_\_ (*get*) into a bad car accident while I \_\_\_\_\_ (*come*) home from work. As I \_\_\_\_\_ (*wait*) to pull out of the office car park, I \_\_\_\_\_ (*notice*) a car approaching me from behind, travelling far too quickly. The ground \_\_\_\_\_ (*be*) wet because it \_\_\_\_\_ (*rain*) all afternoon. The driver \_\_\_\_\_ (*try*) to brake, but obviously he \_\_\_\_\_ (*not, left*) enough space to slow down, so he \_\_\_\_\_ (*drive*) right into the back of my car. The impact \_\_\_\_\_ (*push*) me out into the main road where hundreds of cars \_\_\_\_\_ (*drive*) past. I \_\_\_\_\_ (*make*) contact with multiple vehicles and in all honesty, I \_\_\_\_\_ (*be*) lucky not to have been killed! I \_\_\_\_\_ (*break*) almost all my ribs and \_\_\_\_\_ (*fracture*) my pelvis in the crash. I \_\_\_\_\_ (*spend*) a week in hospital getting better.





# Create a story

**Complete** the sentence starters with your ideas to create a story.

**I was walking back  
from... when...**

**I had been... all day,  
so I was...**

**Until then I had  
never...,**

**So I decided to...**



Change the subject of the  
sentence if you need to!



# Answer key

- P. 5:** Past simple: *heard, looked up, screamed, shrieked, turned around, looked, could, giggled.*  
Past continuous: *were walking, was pointing, was shaking*
- P. 9:** Past simple: *wondered, wanted, went, was*  
Past continuous: *was feeling*  
Past perfect simple: *had planned, had arrived, had figured out, had organised, had had*  
Past perfect continuous: *had been asking*
- P. 17:** Past simple: D  
Past continuous: A  
Past perfect simple: C  
Past perfect continuous: B



## Answer key

**P. 18:** Last month I **got** into a bad car accident while I was **coming home** from work. As I **was waiting / waited** to pull out of the office car park, I **noticed** a car approaching me from behind, travelling far too quickly. The ground **was** wet because **it had been raining** all afternoon. The driver **tried** to brake, but obviously he **hadn't left** enough space to slow down, so he **drove** right into the back of my car. The impact **pushed** me out into the main road where hundreds of cars **were driving** past. I **made** contact with multiple vehicles and in all honesty, I **was** lucky not to have been killed! I **broke** almost all my ribs and **fractured** my pelvis in the crash. I **spent** a week in hospital getting better.



# Summary

## Overview of the narrative tenses

- The **past simple**, **past continuous**, **past perfect simple** and **past perfect continuous** are known as the narrative tenses.
- They are called **narrative** as they are often used to **tell stories**.

## Past simple and past continuous

- We often use the **past simple** to tell stories, where events happen **one after the other**.
- We also see the **past simple** with the **past continuous**. The past continuous tells us what was **going on in the background** when **something else happened** (past simple).

## Past perfect simple

- We use the **past perfect simple** for an event that happened **before** another event in the past.
- We often use it together with the **past simple**.

## Past perfect continuous

- We use the **past perfect continuous** to describe an action that **started in the past** and then **continued up to another point in the past**.



# Vocabulary

to whirl

to shriek

to giggle

to wonder

to go smoothly

