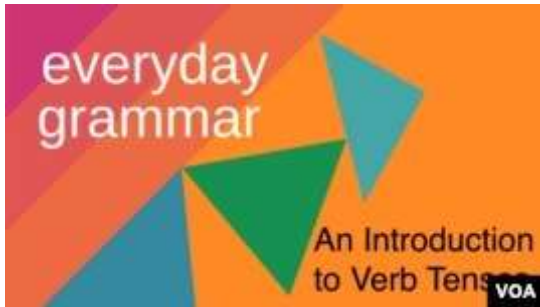


An Introduction to Verb Tenses

For VOA Learning English, this is Everyday Grammar.

Today we are going to give you a basic overview of the verb tense system in English.

Verb tenses tell us how an action relates to the flow of time.



Everyday Grammar: An Introduction to Verb Tenses

There are three main verb tenses in English: *present*, *past* and *future*. The present, past and future tenses are divided into four **aspects**: the *simple*, *progressive*, *perfect* and *perfect progressive*.

There are 12 major verb tenses that English learners should know.

English has only two ways of forming a tense from the verb alone: the past and the present. For example, *we drove* and *we drive*.

To form other verb tenses, you have to add a form of *have*, *be* or *will* in front of the verb. These are called helping, or **auxiliary verbs**.

Time, culture, and grammar

Verb tenses can be difficult to learn in a foreign language. Different cultures think different ways about time. Chinese, for example, has no grammatical verb tenses. Other languages, like Indonesian, express time only through adverbs — there are no changes to the verb form.

English verb tenses give many details about time and action such as:

*Is the action finished? How long did the action happen? Was the action repeated? Did the action happen at a known or unknown time? Is the action a habit? Is the action planned or **spontaneous**?*

It is difficult to think about time **distinctions** that do not exist in your own language. So, it can take many years for English learners to master verb tenses.

Let's get started. We are going to give examples of all 12 verb tenses using the verb *drive*.

Simple Tenses

We'll start with the simple tenses. These are probably the first tenses you learned in English. Simple tenses usually refer to a single action. In general, simple tenses express facts and situations that existed in the past, exist in the present, or will exist in the future.

Simple present: *I drive home every day.*

Simple past: *I drove home yesterday.*

Simple future: *I will drive home later.*

Progressive (Continuous) Tenses

Let's go on to the progressive tenses. We use progressive tenses to talk about unfinished events. Progressive tenses are also called *continuous* tenses.

Past progressive: *I was driving when you called.*

Present progressive: *I am driving now.*

Future progressive: *I will be driving when you call.*

Perfect Tenses

Now let's look at the perfect tenses. Perfect tenses cause the most confusion. To put it simply, they express the idea that one event happens before another event.

There are many tricky exceptions with the perfect tenses, which we will discuss in a future episode. The adverbs *never*, *yet* and *already* are common in perfect tenses.

Present perfect: *I have driven that road.*

Past perfect: *I had already driven that road in the past.*

Future perfect: *I will have driven 200 miles by tomorrow.*

Perfect Progressive Tenses

Finally, let's look at the perfect progressive tenses. Generally, perfect progressive tenses express duration, or *how long*? Perfect progressive tenses usually include the adverbs *for* or *since*.

Present perfect progressive: *I have been driving since this morning.*

Past perfect progressive: *I had been driving for three hours before I stopped to get gas.*

Future perfect progressive: *I will have been driving for five hours by the time I arrive.*

Don't worry if you don't understand everything yet. Here are some recommendations we have for learning verb tenses.

Adverbs are your friends

First, think of adverbs as your friends. Adverbs of time offer valuable clues about the correct verb tense.

Let's use the adverb *ago*. *Ago* is only used in the simple past as in, "I left home three years ago." The adverb *ago* is never used in the present perfect. Certain adverbs occur with certain verb tenses.

Keep it simple

English learners sometimes try to impress people by using complex verb tenses. You often have a choice of several verb tenses. When you do, always choose the simplest one. It will be clearer for your listener, and there is less chance of making a mistake.

Practice with questions

Native speakers don't think **consciously** about verb tenses. With enough practice, English learners can internalize the verb tense system, too. Instead of worrying about deep time relationships, try using adverbs and your ear to choose the right verb tense.

Often when someone asks a question, you can respond in the same verb tense. We'll ask a question in each verb tense. Give an answer in the same tense, then listen to our answer.

Ready?

1. Did you get enough sleep last night? (simple past)

1. Yes, I slept well.

2. Do you shower every day? (simple present)

1. Yes, I shower every day.

3. Are you going to study tonight? (simple future)

1. Yes, I'm going to study tonight.

4. What were you doing when I called you last night? (past progressive)

1. I was eating dinner when you called me last night.

5. What are you doing right now? (present progressive)

1. I am practicing verb tenses right now.

6. What will you be doing at midnight on New Year's Eve? (future progressive)

1. I will be celebrating the New Year with my friends.

7. Had you ever tried skiing before today? (past perfect)

1. Yes, I had already done it several times before.

8. Have you ever broken the law? (present perfect)

1. No, I have never broken the law.

9. Will you have gotten married by the time you turn 30? (future perfect)

1. No, I will not have gotten married by the time I turn 30.

10. . How long had you been smoking before you quit? (past perfect progressive)

1. I had been smoking for two years before I quit.

11. How long have you been waiting for the bus? (present perfect progressive)

a. I have been waiting for the bus for 20 minutes.

12. How long will you have been working before you retire? (future perfect progressive)

13. I will have been working for 30 years before I retire.

This is just a basic introduction to verb tenses. In the following weeks, we will cover the more difficult verb tenses in more detail.

I'm Jill Robbins. And I'm John Russell.

Adam Brock wrote this story for Learning English. Jill Robbins and Kathleen Struck were the editors.

Words in This Story

aspect – *n.* the verb form that indicates completion, duration, or repetition of an action.

distinction – *n.* a difference that you can see, hear, smell, feel, etc: a noticeable difference between things or people

spontaneous – *adj.* done or said in a natural and often sudden way and without a lot of thought or planning

consciously – *adv.* done after thinking about facts and reasons carefully

Reference

VERB TENSES	past	present	future
Simple	It snowed yesterday. Simple past verb	It snows every winter. Simple present verb	It is going to snow tonight. It will snow this winter. Will / be going to + simple present
Progressive	It was snowing when I drove to work. Was/were + -ing verb	It is snowing. Am/is/are+-ing verb	It will be snowing by the time I get home. Will be + -ing verb
Perfect	It had already snowed before I left. Had + past participle verb	I have driven in snow many times. Have/has + past participle verb	It will have snowed 6 inches by the end of the day. Will have + past participle verb

Perfect progressive	It had been snowing for two days before it stopped. Had been + -ing verb + for/since	It has been snowing all month long. Has/have + -ing verb + for/since	It will have been snowing for three days by the time it stops. Will have been + -ing verb + for/since
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