

Verb Tense

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover some specific verb tenses, as well as the process of selecting the correct tense in a sentence. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Present, Past, and Future Tenses

A verb is the part of speech that shows action or describes a state of being. Depending on whether you're describing an action that is taking place in the present, future, or past, that verb is going to change to match tense.

➞ **EXAMPLE** "She walks" is happening now. That means it's a present tense verb, which indicates that something is happening in the present.

Do you notice anything special about present tense? "She walks" could describe what this person is doing in the immediate present or something that she is always going to be doing. **Present tense verbs** work this way.

If you're talking about the future, then you'd say "she will walk" because **future tense verbs** indicate that something will happen sometime in the future.

If you're describing the past, you'd say "she walked" since **past tense verbs** indicate that something happened in the past and is no longer happening.



TERMS TO KNOW

Present Tense Verbs

Verbs that indicate that something is happening in the present

Future Tense Verbs

Verbs that indicate that something will happen sometime in the future

Past Tense Verbs

Verbs that indicate that something happened in the past and is no longer happening

2. Different Types of Past Tense

There is more than one way to describe what happened in the past, and thus, there are actually several past

tenses. The one you'll see and use most commonly is simple past tense ("she walked").

You can usually spot simple past tense verbs because they end with "d" or "ed," like "walked" and "held." These simple verb tenses are the ones you want to use whenever possible.

Tense is also an important element of meaning in a sentence, and you have to be careful with it.

➔ **EXAMPLE** "He cooks" is present tense and "he cooked" is simple past tense. Notice that not only has the tense changed, but the implication of the sentence may have changed as well. Instead of knowing that this man is a person who often cooks, the past tense sentence just tells you that he cooked at one point in the past.

2a. Past Participle

Past tense, in fact, can change a lot about the meaning of a sentence, especially when you use a **past participle**. A past participle is a verb tense that is composed of the past tense of the verb plus "have," "has," or "had."

Here, you have a sentence in simple past tense:

I danced at home.

If you change the verb to a past participle, it becomes:

I have danced at home.

The past tense verb danced is now accompanied by the word "have." That pair is your past participle, a special form of the verb. The past participle can be used in three different ways.

First, it can be used to speak about the past:

I have danced at home.

Second, it can be used to modify something about a noun, which makes it act like another part of speech—the adjective:

Bruised knees.

The verb "bruised" is the past tense of the verb "bruise." But here, it describes the noun "knees," just like an adjective would.

Finally, the past participle can form something called past perfect tense, which you'll now learn about in a little more detail.



TERM TO KNOW

Past Participle

A verb tense that is composed of the past tense of the verb plus "have," "has," or "had."

2b. Past Perfect

Past perfect tense is a type of past tense that describes something that took place in a more distant past instead of the recent past by pairing "had" with a verb.

I danced at home before it was time for dinner.

I had danced at home before it was time for dinner.

In the second sentence, the dancing and the dinner are clearly separated. In the simple past tense sentence above it, the time period isn't so distinct.

This is why past perfect can be useful—it prevents confusion. Just look at how easy it is to get confused about when things happened:

I printed the paper and then the printer broke.

Did the printer break before or after printing?

I had printed the paper and then the printer broke.

Using the past perfect tells you that the printing took place further back in time, before the time when the printer broke.

Changing tenses this way is easy, but unless you need to be really clear about a difference in timing, you generally want to use the simpler form.

3. Using Verb Tense in Sentences

In any sentence, it's important that all the verbs use the same tense to clearly mark the time frame.

I rode my bike and stopped for a drink at the fountain.

Notice that in the sentence above, “rode” and “stopped” are both past tense.

What about in the sentence below?

I ride my biked and stopped for a drink at the fountain.

“Ride” is in present tense, but “stopped” is in past tense. This doesn't make any sense.

This is a pretty common mistake to make in the tense of a sentence—beginning with a verb in one tense, but shifting into another tense for the next verb. The way a reader understands this sentence is altered when the tenses shift, so you want to be careful to avoid this error.

To write sentences that don't confound your readers, ask yourself when an action took place:

- If the action is now, use present.
- If it will be later, use future.
- If it already happened, use simple past.
- If it happened in the past but there are also other events, use past perfect to describe the oldest event.



Here are two different sentences, each missing a verb. Read them and look for context clues that will help you find the proper verb and its tense:

The dog _____ at the cat all day yesterday.

If I'm late, all my friends _____ at the restaurant before me.

In the first sentence, the verb is “barked,” and it’s in simple past tense. What context clues demonstrate this? You know that this event happened yesterday, and you don’t have any reason to add further complexity to the timeline.

In the second sentence, the verb phrase that’s missing is “will eat.” Even though you don’t have a noun telling you exactly when this meal will happen, you know that the friends will eat before the speaker, so this has not happened yet. Therefore, you must be using future tense.

4. Irregular Verbs

There are some verbs that don’t follow the rules for past tense. These are called irregular verbs because instead of using “ed” to show past tense, they transform entirely.

English is full of these verbs, so it’s important to recognize them, and if you’re ever unsure, to check a dictionary. Here are a few:

- is/was
- sing/sang
- are/were
- drink/drank

IN CONTEXT

If you want to talk about your trip to the lake, you’d write “I swam in the lake last year” since “swimmed” doesn’t sound right.

Or if you were talking about a time you tripped down the stairs, you wouldn’t say “I falled.” Instead, you’d say “I fell down the stairs.”



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned about the **present, past, and future tenses** of verbs, as well as the **different types of past tense: past participle form and past perfect**. You now understand that to **use verb tense effectively in sentences**, you should avoid shifting tenses, and instead select the proper verb tense.

Finally, you learned that it’s important to remember that there are various **irregular verbs** that don’t follow the same conjugation rules.

Good luck!



TERMS TO KNOW

Future Tense Verbs

Verbs that indicate that something will happen sometime in the future.

Past Participle

A verb tense that is composed of the past tense of the verb plus "have," "has," or "had."

Past Tense Verbs

Verbs that indicate that something happened in the past and is no longer happening.

Present Tense Verbs

Verbs that indicate that something is happening in the present.