

## Session 2

In the past, we sent letters but now we email and text. It's time to find out how to use **used to** to talk about past habits and situations that have changed. Have a look at the grammar explanations and do some activities to help you learn the structure.

### Activity 1

#### It used to take ages to learn these things!

##### Talking about change

In our debate, we heard Alice and Amith talking about smartphones. They mentioned some ways they have made our lives today different from the past. Here's a guide to help you use **used to** correctly. Read it and then try the activities at the end.



Let's look at some examples carefully. Pay attention to the verb form:

Alice – “**It used to take months for a letter to reach the other side of the world. Now I can message or email and they receive it instantly.**”

Amith – “**I used to enjoy going to the library....We used to be able to disconnect. Now it's all about sharing your daily life on social network.**”

When Alice and Amith say **used to**, are they talking about past, present, or future time. What do you think?

Of course, they are referring to the past. But what does **used to** mean exactly?

Well, to help you understand, take a little time to ask yourself these questions:

When Amith says “**I used to enjoy going to the library,**” is he talking about something he did once? Or is it something he did regularly?

When Alice says “**it used to take months for a letter to reach the other side of the world,**” do we know exactly when? Or is she referring to an unspecified period of time?

In both examples, are these things that still happen now? Or are they things from the past that no longer happen or are no longer true?

In Amith's example, he is talking about something he did on a regular basis in the past. He **used to enjoy going** to the library. Perhaps he went every week or every month – we don't know exactly but we know he went there regularly. It was part of his routine. Does he still go now? Maybe, but he doesn't *enjoy* it in the same way anymore. That has changed.

Let's look at some more examples:

**I used to live** in Egypt when I was a child. (I lived there at some point in my childhood but I don't live there now).

My family and I **used to go** to the seaside every summer for a caravan holiday but we always go on city breaks now. (At some time in the past, we went to the seaside in the summer time and we did this for many years. However, now we go on a different kind of holiday).

My husband **used to smoke** a packet of cigarettes a day! Thankfully, he's given up now. (This was a past habit my husband had but he doesn't do this anymore).

I found an old photo of my mum the other day. I can't believe what huge glasses she **used to wear**! (She had those glasses at some point in the past but she doesn't use them anymore).

In Alice's example, she is talking about something that used to be generally true. Not so long ago, writing a letter was the main way to communicate with people far away and this was true for people all over the world. It **used to take** months for letters to reach the other side of the world. However, that is a thing of the past now. With email and instant messaging, we can keep in touch with our friends and family easily wherever they are and this is also true all over the world.

Let's look at some more general examples:

My grandmother always says people **used to be more polite** when she was younger but I disagree.  
 Did you know that in the Middle Ages, most people **used to think** the Earth was flat?  
 Many children **used to leave** school before they were ten years old but now most people stay at school until they are eighteen.  
 It **used to snow** a lot more when I was younger but winters are much milder now.

In summary, we can use 'used to' to talk about:

- A past routine or habit
- A past state
- A past truth or belief

In all of these cases, this has changed and is no longer happening/true in the present.

We form these sentences as follows:

Subject + used to + verb (bare infinitive)

What about negative forms? Take another look at this example from our debate:

Amith said: "*We **didn't use to have to rely** on our phones to remember our phone numbers.*"

In this example, he is talking about something that was *not true in the past* but is true now (personally, I used to know all my relatives' and friends' phone numbers when I was younger – I still do! – but now, I have to use my phone to remember numbers, including my own!)

Here are some more examples:

I **didn't use to own** a car but now I have one. (In the past, I never had a car but that is different now).  
 I **didn't use to like** broccoli at all! (I didn't like it in the past but now I do).  
 Computers **didn't use to be** so small or so fast! (Older computers were larger and slower than today's machines).

Notice that after **didn't**, we use **use to**, not **used to** (the grammatical rule is the same as past simple, for example we say *I visited* / *I didn't visit...*) In spoken English, **used to** and **use to** sound the same so listen carefully to whether the sentence is negative or positive!

To make that clear, this sentence is correct:

My dad **didn't use to play** golf – he took it up when he retired.

...but this one is wrong:

My dad **didn't used to play** golf – he took it up when he retired.

We can also use 'never' to give a negative meaning:

There **never used to be** a park here when I was a kid.  
 I **never used to cook** at home much but now I make my own meals all the time.

Notice that we use **used to** after never, not **use to**.

For questions, we use did + subject + **use to...?** Here are some examples:

**Did you use to watch** *The A-Team* when you were a kid?  
**Did people really use to think** we would have flying cars in 2015?

## To do

Do you understand the meaning of **used to** now? Test yourself with this matching quiz.

## Next

Now we have learned how to talk about activities in the past with **used to**. But what is the difference between **used to** and the past simple? Continue to the next activity to find out.

