

Grammar Reference

Narrative tenses

Meaning and use

We use narrative tenses to talk about the past. We can use them to tell a story or to describe past events, including personal anecdotes.

*When I **lived** on the island, I **enjoyed** walking on the beach in the early morning with Bonnie - my best friend and my dog. Britain **declared** war on Germany on 3 September 1939 after Germany **had attacked** Poland two days earlier. Britain **had been trying** to negotiate a peaceful settlement.*

The four narrative tenses are the past simple, past continuous, past perfect and past perfect continuous and one or more of these can be used in a sentence.

*We **were walking** as usual one day, when all of a sudden, Bonnie **shot off**. She **started** to bark furiously. I **saw** a man sleeping face down on the sand. Bonnie **continued** to bark, but the man **didn't wake up**. He **wasn't sleeping**; he **was** dead. It **was** clear that the storm **had washed up** the body.*

Past simple

We can use the past simple for actions that started and finished in the past, for example a series of events in someone's life.

*Nelson Mandela **was born** in 1918. He **became** the first black President of South Africa. He **spent** 27 years in prison in his battle against the system of apartheid.*

The past simple is often used in stories and dialogue, too.

- *When Bobby **went down** for breakfast, Matt **looked up**.*
- *"**Did you hear** the storm last night?"*
- *Bobby **didn't answer**.*
- *"Your brother **went out** last night. He **didn't come back**. Do you know where **he went**?"*
- *Bobby's heart **sank**. She knew exactly where **Dan had gone**...*

Past continuous

We use the past continuous for background information and to describe a scene or situation that continued for some time.

*At 6 o'clock that evening Dan **was still missing**. Bobby **was feeling** worried.
Bonnie **was barking** loudly.*

Past simple and past continuous

We often use the past simple and past continuous together when one action interrupts another.

*I **was strolling** along the beach one day when suddenly, Bonnie **ran off**.
It **was still raining** when Bobby **woke up** the next morning. Dan **was sitting** at the table when she **went** into the kitchen.*

Past simple and past perfect

We can use the past perfect with the past simple together in a sentence to describe an action that happened before another past action.

*I quickly **realised** that the storm the previous night **had washed up** the body.
Bobby **knew** that Dan **hadn't wanted** to come home but she also knew that **he hadn't had** any other option.*

Past perfect continuous

We use this tense to describe something that has been happening over a long period of time.

*I could tell that the body **had been lying** on the beach for several hours because the man's clothes were dry.
Britain **had been trying** to negotiate a peaceful settlement between Poland and Germany.*

Take note: linking devices

When we tell a story in the past, we often use linking words or phrases to join two or more sentences or clauses. This helps the narrative to flow in a more interesting and natural way. Some linking phrases and words show a sequence of events or actions.

*Nelson Mandela never gave up on his struggle against apartheid. **As the years went by**, his fame spread to every corner of the world. **In the end**, under enormous global pressure, the government had no option but to release him.*

Other linking words and phrases that signal order of events are: *First of all ... , Then ... , Next ... , Finally ... , After that ... , After several months/days/hours/weeks ... , By the time ... , All of a sudden ...*

We also use linking words and phrases in dialogue to indicate interest in what is being said and to keep the conversation flowing.

- *So how did you meet your wife?*
- *Well, it's a strange story: **what happened was** I was training as a paramedic and one day we got a call to a house in East Street.*
- *Oh, my cousin lives there! ...*
- ***Really?** ... **So, anyway,** when we arrived in East Street, another ambulance was already there!*
- ***So what happened?***
- *Sylvie and I treated the patient together. The rest is history!*