

# Grammar Reference

## Past perfect tense

### Meaning and use

We often use the past perfect when two things in a sentence happened in the past, and we need to show which thing in the sentence happened first.

*When I arrived home, my sister **had** already **made** lunch.*

Here, two things happened: **I arrived home** and **my sister made lunch**. We can use the past simple, with time expressions like **then**, to talk about the things in the order that they happened.

*My sister **made** lunch. **Then** I **arrived** home.*

We can use the past perfect next to the past simple, to show which event happened first.

**What happened first:** my son made a cake

**What happened second:** I arrived

*When I arrived home, my son **had already made** an enormous carrot cake.*

With the past perfect, we can change the order of events in the sentence, and still show what happened first.

*I woke up late because **I'd forgotten** to set my alarm clock.*

But we can also use the past perfect when events in a sentence are in the order that they happened.

*I **had just taken off my coat** when the telephone rang.*

The past perfect part of the sentence always shows the event that happened first.

***We hadn't finished** cleaning by the time the guests arrived.  
By the time the guests arrived, **we hadn't finished** cleaning.*

### Form

The past perfect is made with **subject + had/hadn't + past participle**.

#### Positive

*When my parents got to the station, they realised **they had left** the tickets at home.  
By the time Mark arrived at work, **the staff meeting had already started**.  
I woke up late because **I'd forgotten** to set my alarm clock.*

#### Negative

*Kerry couldn't leave work on time because **she hadn't written** the report.  
They didn't tell the police about the accident **they had seen**.*

#### Question

***Had you finished** your homework before the movie started?  
**Hadn't John told** them what he wanted?*

#### Take note: adverbs

Sometimes you might need to use an adverb like **already** or **just** with the past perfect. In those cases, the adverb often goes between **had/hadn't** and the **past participle**.

*When I arrived home, my sister had **already** made lunch.  
I had **just** taken off my coat when the telephone rang.*

#### Take note: time expressions

The past perfect is often used with time expressions like **when** and **by the time**.

***When** I arrived home, my sister had made lunch.  
**By the time** I arrived at work, the staff meeting had already started.*

#### Spoken English

You might notice that sometimes the past perfect looks like this:

*I **had left** my season ticket at home.*

Other times, it looks like this:

***I'd forgotten** to set my alarm clock.*

In speech and in informal writing, it's common to use a contraction with the auxiliary verb.

*I'd forgotten to set my alarm clock.*

*I **hadn't** written the report.*

When you listen to someone using the negative form **hadn't**, listen carefully. It is sometimes difficult to hear the difference between **had** and **hadn't**, but it makes a big difference in meaning!