Chapter 3

Relax! Understanding Verb Tense

In This Chapter

- Expressing time with verbs
- Understanding the meanings of verb tenses
- Applying the correct verb tenses
- Dealing with irregular verb forms

You can tell time lots of ways: look at a clock, pull out your phone, or check the verb. Surprised you with that last one, didn't I? Besides showing the action or state of being in the sentence, the verb also indicates the time the action or "being" took place. (For more information on finding the verb in a sentence, see Chapter 2.)

In some lucky languages — Thai, for example — the verb has basically one form. Whether the sentence is about the past, the present, or the future, the verb is the same. Extra words — yesterday, tomorrow, now, and so forth — indicate the time. Not so in English (sigh). In English, six different tenses of verbs express time. In other words, each tense places the action or the state of being discussed in the sentence at a point in time.

Three of the six English tenses are called *simple.* In this chapter, I explain the simple tenses in some detail, such as the difference between *I go* and *I am going.* The other three tenses are called *perfect.* (Trust me, the perfect tenses are far from it.) I touch upon the basics of the perfect tenses: present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect in this chapter. Then I dig a little more deeply into present perfect tense. The other two perfect tenses — past and future — are real headaches and far less common than present perfect, so I save them for later. For an in-depth explanation of the past perfect and future perfect tenses, see Chapter 18.

Simplifying Matters: The Simple Tenses

The three simple tenses are present, past, and future. Each of the simple tenses (just to make things even *more* fun) has two forms. One is the unadorned, no-frills, plain tense. This form doesn't have a special name; it

is just called *present, past,* or *future.* It shows actions or states of being at a point in time, but it doesn't always pin down a specific moment. The other form is called *progressive.* It shows actions or a state of being *in progress.*

Present tense

Present tense tells you what is going on right now. As mentioned in the previous section, this simple tense has two forms — one is called *present,* and the other is *progressive.* The present form shows action or a state of being that is occurring now, that is generally true, or that is always happening. The present *progressive* form is similar, but it often implies a process. (The difference between the two is subtle. I go into more details about using these forms below.) For now, take a look at a couple of sentences in the no-frills present tense:

> Reggie *rolls* his tongue around the pastry. (*rolls* is in present tense)
>
> George *plans* nothing for New Year's Eve because he never *has* a date. (*plans, has* are in present tense)

Now here are two sentences in the present progressive form:

> Alexei *is axing* the proposal to cut down the national forest. (*is axing* is in present progressive form)
>
> Michael and Lulu *are skiing* far too fast toward that cliff. (*are skiing* is in present progressive form)

Past tense

Past tense tells you what happened before the present time. This simple tense also has two forms — plain and chocolate-sprinkled. Sorry, I mean plain, which is called *past,* and *past progressive.* Consider these two past-tense sentences:

> When the elastic in Ms. Belli's girdle *snapped,* we all *woke* up. (*snapped* and *woke* are in past tense)
>
> Despite the strong plastic ribbon, the package *became* unglued and *spilled* onto the conveyor belt. (*became* and *spilled* are in past tense)

Here are two more examples, this time in the past progressive form:

> While Buzz *was sleeping,* his cat, Catnip, *was* completely *destroying* the sofa. (*was sleeping* and *was destroying* are in the progressive form of the past tense)
>
> Lola's friends *were passing* tissues to Lulu at a rate of five per minute. (*were passing* is in the progressive form of the past tense)

You can't go wrong with the past tense, except for the irregular verbs, which I address later in this chapter. But one very common mistake is to mix past and present tenses in the same story. Here's an example:

> So I go to the restaurant looking for Cindy because I want to tell her about Grady's date with Eleanor. I walk in and I see Brad Pitt! So I went up to him and said, "How are the kids?"

The speaker started in present tense — no problem. Even though an event is clearly over, present tense is okay if you want to make a story more dramatic. (See the sidebar "The historical present," later in this chapter.) But the last sentence switches gears — suddenly we're in past tense. Problem! Don't change tenses in the middle of a story. And don't bother celebrities either.

Future tense

Future tense talks about what has not happened yet. This simple tense is the only one that always needs helping verbs to express meaning, even for the plain, no-frills version.

Helping verbs (see Chapter 2) such as *will, shall, have, has, should,* and so forth change the meaning of the main verb.

Future tenses — this will shock you — come in two forms. I'm not talking about alternate universes here; this book is about grammar, not sci-fi adventures! One form of the future tense is called *future,* and the other is *future progressive.* The unadorned form of the future tense goes like this:

> Nancy *will position* the wig in the exact center of her head. (*will position* is in future tense)
>
> Lisa and I *will* never *part*, thanks to that bottle of glue! (*will part* is in future tense)

A couple of examples of the future progressive:

> During the post-election period, George *will be pondering* his options. (*will be pondering* is in the progressive form of the future tense)
>
> Lola *will be sprinkling* the flowers with fertilizer in a vain attempt to keep them fresh. (*will be sprinkling* is in the progressive form of the future tense)

Find the verbs and sort them into present, past, and future tenses.

A. When the tornado whirls overhead, we run for the camera and the phone number of the television station.

B. Shall I compare you to a winter's day?

C. When you were three, you blew out all the candles on your birthday cake.

Answers: In sentence A, the present tense verbs are *whirls* and *run.* In sentence B, the future tense verb is *shall compare.* In sentence C, the past tense verbs are *were* and *blew*.

Now find the verbs and sort them into present progressive, past progressive, and future progressive forms.

A. Exactly 5,000 years ago, a dinosaur was living in that mud puddle.

B. Zeus and Apollo are establishing a union of mythological characters.

C. The pilot will be joining us as soon as the aircraft clears the Alps.

Answers: In sentence A, the past progressive verb is *was living.* In sentence B, the present progressive verb is *are enrolling.* In sentence C, the future progressive verb is *will be joining.*

Using the Tenses Correctly

What's the difference between each pair of simple tense forms? Not a whole lot. People often interchange these forms without creating any problems. But shades of difference in meaning do exist.

Present and present progressive

The single-word form of the present tense may be used for things that are generally true at the present time but not necessarily happening right now. For example:

Ollie *attends* wrestling matches every Sunday.

If you call Ollie on Sunday, you'll get this annoying message he recorded on his answering machine because he's at the arena (*attends* is in present tense). You may also get this message on a Thursday (or on another day) and it is still correct, even though on Thursdays Ollie stays home to play chess. Now read this sentence:

Ollie *is playing* hide-and-seek with his dog Spot.

This sentence means that right now (*is playing* is in the progressive form of the present tense), as you write or say this sentence, Ollie is running around the living room looking for Spot, who is easy to find because he ran through that tray of fluorescent paint.

Past and past progressive

The difference between the plain past tense and the past progressive tense is pretty much the same as in the present tense. The single-word form often shows what happened in the past more generally. The progressive form may pinpoint action or a state of being at a specific time or occurring in the past on a regular basis.

> Gulliver *went* to the store and *bought* clothes for all his little friends.

This sentence means that at some point in the past Gulliver whipped out his charge card and finished off his Christmas list (*went* and *bought* are in past tense).

> While Gulliver *was shopping,* his friends *were planning* their revenge.

This sentence means that Gulliver shouldn't have bothered because at the exact moment he was spending his allowance, his friends were deciding what time to pour ink into his lunchbox (*was shopping* and *were planning* are in the progressive form of the past tense).

> Gulliver *was shopping* until he *was dropping,* despite his mother's strict credit limit.

This sentence refers to one of Gulliver's bad habits, his tendency to go shopping every spare moment (*was shopping* and *was dropping* are in the progressive form of the past tense). The shopping was repeated on a daily basis, over and over again. (Hence, Gulliver's mom imposed the strict credit limit.)

Future and future progressive

You won't find much difference between these two. The progressive gives you slightly more of a sense of being in the middle of things. For example:

> The actor *will be playing* Hamlet with a great deal of shouting.

The actor's actions in the sentence above may be a little more immediate than

> The actor *will play* Hamlet with a great deal of shouting.

In the first example, *will be playing* is in the progressive form of the future tense. In the second example, *will play* is in future tense.

The historical present

Not surprisingly, you use present tense for actions that are currently happening. But (Surprise!) you may also use present tense for some actions that happened a long time ago and for some actions that never happened at all. The historical present is a way to write about history or literature:

> On December 7, 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt *tells* the nation about the attack on Pearl Harbor. The nation immediately *declares* war.
>
> Harry Potter *faces* three tests when he *represents* Hogwarts in the tournament.

In the first sentence, *tells* and *declares* are in present tense, even though the sentence concerns events that occurred decades ago. Here the historical present makes the history more dramatic. (Non-historians often tell a story in present tense also, just to make the account more vivid.) In the second sentence, *faces* and *represents* are in present tense. The idea is that for each reader who opens the book, the story begins anew. With the logic that we have come to know and love in English grammar, the events are always happening, even though Harry Potter is a fictional character and the events never happened.

Understanding the difference between the two forms of the simple tenses entitles you to wear an Official Grammarian hat. But if you don't catch on to the distinction, don't lose sleep over the issue. If you can't discern the subtle differences in casual conversation, your listeners probably won't either. In choosing between the two forms, you're dealing with shades of meaning, not Grand-Canyon-sized discrepancies.

Perfecting Verbs: The Perfect Tenses

Now for the hard stuff. These three tenses — present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect — may give you gray hair, even if you are only twelve. And they have progressive forms too! As with the simple tenses, each tense has a no-frills version called by the name of the tense: present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect. The progressive form adds an "ing" to the mix. The progressive is a little more immediate than the other form, expressing an action or state of being in progress.

In this section, I state the basics and provide examples. For a complete explanation of present perfect and present perfect progressive tense, see "Using Present Perfect Tense Correctly" later in this chapter. For a full discussion of the correct sequence with past and future perfect tenses, see Chapter 18.

Present perfect and present perfect progressive

The two present perfect forms show actions or states of being that began in the past but are still going on in the present. These forms are used whenever any action or state of being spans two time zones — past and present.

First, check out examples with present perfect tense:

> Roger and his friends *have spent* almost every penny of the inheritance. (*have spent* is in present perfect tense)
>
> Lulu's mortal enemy, Roger, *has pleaded* with her to become a professional tattooist. (*has pleaded* is in present perfect tense)

Now peruse these progressive examples:

> Roger *has been studying* marble shooting for fifteen years without learning any worthwhile techniques. (*has been studying* is in the progressive form of the present perfect tense)
>
> Lulu and her mentor Lola *have been counting sheep* all night. (*have been counting* is in the progressive form of the present perfect tense)

Past perfect and past perfect progressive

Briefly, each of these forms places an action in the past in relation to another action in the past. In other words, a timeline is set. The timeline begins some time ago and ends at some point before NOW. At least two events are on the timeline. (For more information about how to use the past perfect, see Chapter 18.) Here are a couple of examples of the past perfect tense:

> After she *had sewn* up the wound, the doctor realized that her watch was missing! (*had sewn* is in past perfect tense)
>
> The watch *had ticked* for ten minutes before the nurse discovered its whereabouts. (*had ticked* is in past perfect tense)

Compare the preceding sentences with examples of the past perfect progressive (try saying *that* three times fast without spraying your listener!):

> The patient *had been considering* a lawsuit but changed his mind. (*had been considering* is in the progressive form of the past perfect tense)
>
> The doctor *had been worrying* about a pending lawsuit, but her patient dropped his case. (*had been worrying* is in the progressive form of the past perfect tense)

Future perfect and future perfect progressive

These two forms talk about events or states of being that have not happened yet in relation to another event even further in the future. In other words, these forms create another timeline, with at least two events or states of being on it. (For a complete explanation of how to use the future perfect tense, see Chapter 18.)

First, take a look at the plain version of the future perfect:

> Appleby *will have eaten* the entire piece of fruit by the time the bell rings at the end of recess. (*will have eaten* is in future perfect tense)
>
> When Appleby finally arrives at grammar class, the teacher *will have* already *outlined* at least 504 grammar rules. (*will have outlined* is in future perfect tense)

Now take a look at the progressive form of the future perfect tense:

> When the clocks strikes four, Appleby *will have been chewing* for 29 straight minutes without swallowing even one bite. (*will have been chewing* is in the progressive form of the future perfect tense)
>
> By the time he swallows, Appleby's teacher *will have been explaining* the virtues of digestion to her class for a very long time. (*will have been explaining* is in the progressive form of the future perfect tense)

Using Present Perfect Tense Correctly

This mixture of present *(has, have)* and past is a clue to its use: present perfect tense ties the past to the present. When you use it, you're expressing an idea that includes an element of the past and an element of the present.

> I *have gone* to the school cafeteria every day for six years, and I *have* not yet *found* one edible item.

This sentence means that at present I am still in school, still trying to find something to eat, and for the past six years I was in school also, trudging to the cafeteria each day, searching for a sandwich without mystery meat in it.

> Bertha *has* frequently *called* Charles, but Charles *has* not *called* Bertha back.

This sentence means that in the present Bertha hasn't given up yet; she's still trying to reach Charles from time to time. In the past Bertha also phoned Charles. In the present and in the past, Charles hasn't bothered to check his voice mail, which now has 604 messages.

Some tense pairs

Helping verbs, as well as main verbs, have tenses. Some of the most common pairs are *can/could* and *may/might*. The first verb in each pair is in present tense; the second is in past tense. If you *can* imagine, you are speaking about the present. If you *could* imagine, you are speaking about the past. More and more people interchange these helping verbs at random, but technically, the verbs do express time. So remember:

Now you *may* talk about how much you hate writing school reports.

Yesterday you *might* have gone to the store if the sky hadn't dumped a foot of snow on your head.

After six years of lessons, you *can* finally dance a mean tango.

No one ever danced as well as Fred Astaire *could* in those old movie musicals.

As with the simple present tense, the present perfect tense takes two forms. One is called *present perfect*, and the other *present perfect progressive*. Shades of difference in meaning exist between the two — the progressive is a little more immediate — but nothing you need to worry about.

Which one is correct?

A. Bertha moved into that building in 1973 and lived there ever since.

B. Bertha has moved into that building in 1973 and lived there ever since.

C. Bertha moved into that building in 1973 and has lived there ever since.

Answer: Sentence C is correct. You cannot use the simple past, as in sentence A, because a connection to the present exists (the fact that Bertha still lives in that building). Sentence B is wrong because the moving isn't connected to the present; it's over and done with. So you can't use present perfect for the move. Sentence C has the right combination — the move, now over, should be expressed in simple past. The event that began in the past and is still going on (Bertha's living in the building) needs present perfect tense.

Forming Present and Past Participles of Regular Verbs

I used to tell my classes that my gray hair came from my struggles with *participles,* but I was just trying to scare them into doing their grammar homework. Participles are not very mysterious; as you may guess from the spelling, a *par*ticiple is simply a *part* of the verb. Each verb has two participles — a present

participle and a past participle. You may have noticed the *present participle* in the present progressive tenses. The present participle is the *ing* form of the verb. The past participle helps form the present perfect tense because this tense spans both the past and present. Regular past participles are formed by adding *ed* to the verb. Table 3-1 shows a selection of regular participles.

Table 3-1 Examples of Regular Participles

Verb	*Present Participle*	*Past Participle*
ask	asking	asked
beg	begging	begged
call	calling	called
dally	dallying	dallied
empty	emptying	emptied
fill	filling	filled
grease	greasing	greased

Just to Make Things More Difficult: Irregular Verbs

When you're out bargain hunting, irregulars look good, because a tiny variation from "regular" merchandise lowers the price considerably. Unfortunately, an irregular is not a bargain in the grammar market. In this section, I break down the irregulars into two parts. The first part is the mother of all irregular verbs, *to be.* Second is a list of irregular past-tense forms and past participles.

"To be or not to be" is a complete pain

Possibly the weirdest verb in the English language, the verb *to be,* changes more frequently than any other. Here it is, tense by tense.

Present Tense

Singular	*Plural*
I am	we are
you are	you are
he, she, it is	they are

Note that the singular forms are in the first column and plural forms are in the second column. Singulars are for one person or thing and plurals for more than one. "You" is listed twice because it may refer to one person or to a group. (Just one more bit of illogic in the language.)

Past Tense

Singular	***Plural***
I was	we were
you were	you were
he, she, it was	they were

Future Tense

Singular	***Plural***
I will be	we will be
you will be	you will be
he, she, it will be	they will be

Present Perfect

Singular	***Plural***
I have been	we have been
you have been	you have been
he, she, it has been	they have been

Past Perfect

Singular	***Plural***
I had been	we had been
you had been	you had been
he, she, it had been	they had been

Future Perfect

Singular	***Plural***
I will have been	we will have been
you will have been	you will have been
he, she, it will have been	they will have been

Irregular past and past participles

Are you having fun yet? Now the true joy begins. Dozens and dozens of English verbs have irregular past tense forms, as well as irregular past participles. (The present participles, except for the occasional change from the letter *y* to the letter *i*, are fairly straightforward. Just add *ing*.) I won't list all the irregular verbs here, just a few you may find useful in everyday writing. If you have questions about a particular verb, check your dictionary. In Table 3-2, the first column is the infinitive form of the verb. (The infinitive is the "to + verb" form — to laugh, to cry, to learn grammar, and so on.) The second column is the simple past tense. The third column is the past participle, which is combined with *has* (singular) or *have* (plural) to form the present perfect tense. The past participle is also used with *had* to form the past perfect tense.

Table 3-2 Forms of Irregular Participles

Verb	*Past*	*Past Participle*
bear	bore	borne
become	became	become
begin	began	begun
bite	bit	bitten
break	broke	broken
bring	brought	brought
catch	caught	caught
choose	chose	chosen
come	came	come
do	did	done
drink	drank	drunk
drive	drove	driven
eat	ate	eaten
fall	fell	fallen
feel	felt	felt
fly	flew	flown
freeze	froze	frozen
get	got	got or gotten
go	went	gone
know	knew	known
lay	laid	laid
lead	led	led

Verb	*Past*	*Past Participle*
lend	lent	lent
lie	lay	lain
lose	lost	lost
ride	rode	ridden
ring	rang	rung
rise	rose	risen
run	ran	run
say	said	said
see	saw	seen
set	set	set
shake	shook	shaken
sing	sang	sung
sink	sank or sunk	sunk
sit	sat	sat
sleep	slept	slept
speak	spoke	spoken
steal	stole	stolen
swim	swam	swum
take	took	taken
throw	threw	thrown
wear	wore	worn
win	won	won
write	wrote	written

Setting Up Correct Verbs

To sit and *to set* are perfectly fine verbs, but they're not interchangeable. *Sit* is what you do when you stop standing and make a lap. *Set* is what you do to something else — to place an object somewhere or to adjust or regulate something. Check out these examples:

> Anna sits in front of the television, even when it's broken. (Anna's on the couch, staring at a blank screen.)
>
> Arthur set the raygun to "stun" and then set it carefully on the shelf. (Arthur's turned the dial on his weapon and then placed it out of harm's way.)

In some parts of the world, "to set a spell" means to rest. That expression is perfectly fine when informality is acceptable, but in formal English, be sure you *sit*, not *set* on your chair.