

Past Tense

Definition of Past Tense

In grammar, past tense refers to a verb-tense combination whose sole purpose is to state an action to have happened in the time that has passed. It is second to present tense, in which the action takes place in the present moment. A [sentence](#) in past tense always uses the second form of verb. A sentence in past tense does not need any auxiliary, except when it is in negative or interrogative form, in which case, it uses “did not” or “did” in negative and interrogative forms respectively.

For instance, in the sentence, “She looked around carefully, then ran to the car, slid inside and locked the doors, her heart pounding. She headed downtown ...” (*Tell me Your Dreams*, by Sidney Sheldon), all of the underlined verbs are in the past tense.

Past tense also uses some specific words to designate when the action happened in the past, such as “yesterday,” “last night,” “the previous day,” or “the last day.” Also, there is a difference in the past tense and past form of verb. Past tense specifically refers to the past time, but past form of the verb is the second form of verb after the present form that is used in simple past tense.

Common Use of Past Tense

I visited him in hospital yesterday.
He planned the ceremony by himself.
Yesterday, they hiked down the mountain.
Perry enrolled in college.
Whenever she played tennis she would injure herself.

Examples of Past Tense in Literature

Example #1: *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (by L. Frank Baum)

“And the Scarecrow found a tree full of nuts and filled Dorothy’s basket with them, so that she would not be hungry for a long time. She thought this was very kind and thoughtful of the Scarecrow, but she laughed heartily at the awkward way in which the poor creature picked up the nuts.”

In this example, all the past tense verbs are underlined. They include “found,” “filled,” “thought,” “laughed,” and “picked up,” each referring to [activities](#) that happened in the past.

Example #2: *A Romance of Rust* (by Donovan Hohn)

“I walked among fabulous machines as small as schnauzers and as huge as elephants, all gleaming in the August sun. Drive belts whirred, flywheels revolved, pistons fired, and a forest of smokestacks pipd foul smoke and rude music into the otherwise cloudless sky.”

Here, the [subject](#) “I” has performed some activities in the past as indicated by the past forms of the verbs “walked,” “whirred,” “revolved,” “fired,” and “pipd” showed.

Example #3: *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (by Annie Dillard)

“Last year I saw three migrating Canada geese flying low over the frozen duck pond where I stood. I heard a heart-stopping blast of speed before I saw them; I felt the flayed air slap at my face. They thundered across the pond...”

The author Annie Dillard has described habitual activities of the subject in this passage. These activities occur the past, including “saw,” “stood,” “felt,” and “thundered.”

“The two men appeared out of nowhere, a few yards apart in the narrow, moonlit lane... They turned right. The high hedge curved into them. The interest around the table sharpened palpably: Some stiffened, others fidged, all gazing at Snape and Voldemort.”

Each of the underlined verbs in this example is in the simple past tense. These include “appeared,” “turned,” “curved,” “sharpened,” “stiffened” and “fidged,” and have used second form.

Example #5: *Vacation '58* (by John Hughes)

“Dad drove up on the sidewalk and ran over a bike and some toys. Mom accused him of being asleep at the wheel, but he said he was just unfamiliar with Illinois traffic signs...He took off his shoes, rolled down the window, turned the radio way up...”

In this example, all the highlighted verbs in each sentence depict an activity taking place at some point in the past.

Example #6: *The Chronicles of Narnia* (by C.S Lewis)

““Nothing there!” said Peter, and they all trooped out again – all except Lucy. She stayed behind because she thought it would be worth while trying the door of the wardrobe, even though she felt almost sure that it would be locked. To her surprise it opened quite easily, and two moth-balls dropped out.”

Here, the author has described a character “Lucy,” and what happened to her when she was left behind by others. All activities related to her occurred in the past, as shown by the underlined past forms of the respective verbs.

Function of Past Tense

The function of past tense in speech and writing is to express action,

purpose is to place a situation or action, or to refer to habitual activities, states, conditions, and events in the past. It is mostly used in fictions and plays, where the events are stated to have happened in the time having passed. The major objective of using past tense is to draw a moral purpose from the past narratives.