

Grammar 19—Imperfective, Perfective, and Future Tense

Russian verbs come in pairs. One of each pair is said to be imperfective. This means that it refers to an *ongoing action* or *repeated action*. The other is perfective which means that it describes a *single completed action* and the narrator believes that its completion *moves his story forward*. Consider these examples:

See Also

- [Grammar 8—Verb Conjugation](#)
- [Grammar 19—Imperfective, Perfective, and Future Tense Slide](#)

Imperfective:

Я спрашивал каждого.

I was asking each person.

Perfective:

Я спросил вас.

I did ask you.

In the imperfective example, the speaker is simply explaining what he was doing. In the perfective he is making the point that you had your chance to voice an opinion. It moves his story forward.

In [Grammar 8—Verb Conjugation](#) we showed you the past and present tenses of imperfective verbs. We now show you the future tense which is formed differently for imperfective and perfective verbs. The future tense of imperfective verbs is made using a form of “to be” as a helping verb, just like in English. Perfective verbs have no present tense. The future tense looks like the present tense of an imperfective verb.

Conjugation of спрашивать/спросить (to ask in the sense of inquire)

	Past Tense	Present Tense	Future Tense
Imperfective спрашивать to be asking	Я спрашивал(а) I was asking Мы спрашивали We were asking Ты спрашивал(а) Thou wert asking Вы спрашивали You were asking Он спрашивал He was asking Она спрашивала She was asking Оно спрашивало It was asking Они спрашивали They were asking	Я спрашиваю I am asking Мы спрашиваем We are asking Ты спрашиваешь Thou art asking Вы спрашиваете You are asking Он/Она/Оно спрашивает He/She/It is asking Они спрашивают They are asking	Я буду спрашивать I will be asking Мы будем спрашивать We will be asking Ты будешь спрашивать Thou wilt be asking Вы будете спрашивать You will be asking Он/Она/Оно будет спрашивать He/She/It will be asking Они будут спрашивать They will be asking
Perfective спросить to ask (once)	Я спросил(а) I asked Мы спросили We asked Ты спросил(а) Thou askedst Вы спросили We asked Он спросил He asked Она спросила She asked Оно спросило It asked Они спросили They asked	Perfective Verbs have no Present Tense	Я спрошу I shall ask Мы спросим We shall ask Ты спросишь Thou wilt ask Вы спросите You will ask Он/Она/Оно спросит He/She/It will ask Они спросят They will ask

Grammar 19—Imperfective, Perfective, and Future Tense

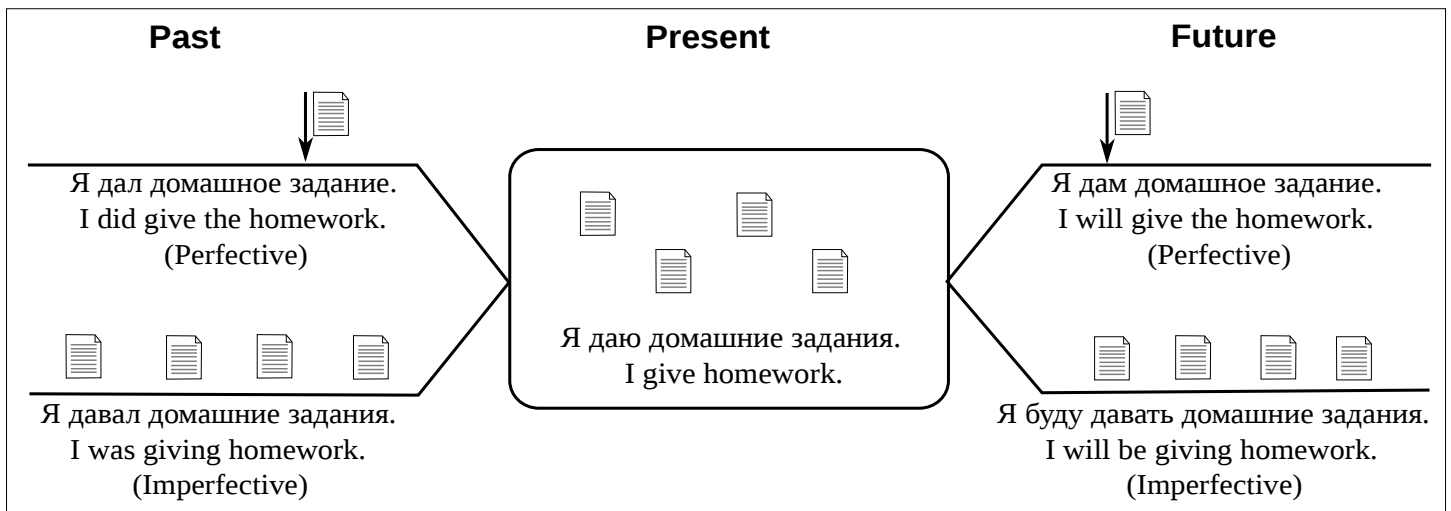
Conjugation of давать/дать (to give)

	Past Tense	Present Tense	Future Tense
Imperfective давать to be giving	Я дава́л(а) I was giving Мы дава́ли We were giving Ты дава́л(а) Thou wert giving Вы дава́ли You were giving Он дава́л He was giving Она дава́ла She was giving Оно дава́ло It was giving Они дава́ли They were giving	Я даю́ I am giving Мы даём We are giving Ты даёшь Thou art giving Вы даёте You are giving Он/Она́/Оно́ даёт He/She/It is giving Они́ дают They are giving	Я бу́ду дава́ть I will be giving Мы бу́дем дава́ть We will be giving Ты бу́дешь дава́ть Thou wilt be giving Вы бу́дете дава́ть You will be giving Он/Она́/Оно́ бу́дет дава́ть He/She/It will be giving Они́ бу́дут дава́ть They will be giving
Perfective дать to give (once)	Я дал(а́) I gave Мы да́ли We gave Ты дал(а́) Thou gavest Вы да́ли We gave Он дал He gave Она да́ла She gave Оно да́ло It gave Они да́ли They gave	Perfective Verbs have no Present Tense	Я дам I shall give Мы да́дим We shall give Ты дашь Thou wilt give Вы да́дите You will give Он/Она́/Оно́ даст He/She/It will give Они́ да́дут They will give

Note that the conjugation of давать in the present tense and дать in the future are irregular.

Perfective and Imperfective Illustrated

Students often misunderstand the statement that the perfective describes a single action. They mistakenly ask themselves whether the action has ever been or ever will be repeated. What actually matters is whether or not the speaker is referring to a single instance of the named action. The illustration below should make this clear. In each case the factual context is the same: the teacher regularly assigns homework. But depending on what he wants to say he chooses the perfective or the imperfective to talk about how he assigns homework.



Notice that when he wants to say that he is the kind of person who assigns homework, he uses the imperfective (давать). But when he refers to giving a particular homework assignment and wants to say that as a consequence the students ought to have done it or will be able to do it, he uses the perfective (дать).

The need for the perfective is not simply a question of how many times the event occurs. For example, in this sentence our teacher uses the imperfective to talk about the giving of a single assignment:

Я давал домашнее задание когда землетрясение ударило.

I was giving the homework assignment when the earthquake struck.

Here he is not making the point that the assignment was definitely given. The giving of the assignment is simply context, so he uses the imperfective. He is really telling a story about an earthquake. In this story the earthquake striking is a single completed action which advances the plot. Consequently it is expressed using a perfective verb (ударить).