

Use of tenses

Talking about the present

The present progressive is used:

- to talk about an action that is happening now, or about a temporary situation:
 - *We're just **having** breakfast.*
 - *What **are** you **reading**?*
 - *She's **not listening** to me.*
 - *They're **spending** a year in Spain.*
- to talk about something that is not yet finished, even if you are not doing it at the moment when you are talking:
 - *I'm **learning** Italian.*
 - *She's **writing** a novel.*
- with **always**, to talk about something that happens often, and that you find annoying:
 - *He's **always asking** silly questions.*
 - *They're **always coming** round here to borrow something.*

NOTE Some verbs are not used in the progressive tenses, for example **need, want, know, agree, seem, appear, understand, smell, hear**, etc. These verbs refer to a state, not an action.

- *I **need** some new shoes.*
- *He **wants** to go home.*
- *Do you **know** Tania Smith?*
- *They **love** Japanese food.*
- *She **hates** her job.*

NOTE Other verbs are used in the present progressive when they refer to an action, and the present simple when they refer to a state:

- *He's **tasting** the soup.*
- *The soup **tastes** salty.*
- *She's **being** difficult again.*
- *She's **a** difficult child.*
- *What **are** you **thinking** about?*
- *Do you **think** I should leave?*

The present simple is used:

- to talk about a permanent situation or something that is always true:
 - *He **lives** in Spain.*
 - *Does he **work** in a factory?*
 - *Insects **have** six legs.*
 - *What temperature **does** water **boil** at?*
- to talk about things that happen regularly:
 - *She **leaves** for school at 8 o'clock.*
 - *We **don't** often **go** out for a meal.*
 - *What time **do** you **catch** the bus?*

Talking about the past

The past simple is used:

- to talk about an action that took place in the past:
 - *He **got** up, **paid** the bill and **left**.*
 - *I **didn't** read the letter, I just **gave** it to Lee.*
 - *What **did** you **say**?*
- NOTE** Often a specific time in the past is mentioned:
 - ***Did** you **speak** to Amy yesterday?*
- to talk about a state that continued for some time, but that is now finished:
 - *I **went** to school in Scotland.*
 - ***Did** she really **work** there for ten years?*
- to talk about actions that happened regularly in the past:
 - *I often **played** tennis with her.*
 - *She **always won**.*
 - *They **never went** to the cinema when they lived in the country.*

The present perfect is used:

- to talk about something that happened during a period of time that is not yet finished:
 - *The train **has been** late three times this week.*
 - *He still **hasn't** visited her.*
- when the time in the past is not mentioned, or is not important:
 - *He's **written** a book.*
 - *We've **bought** a new computer.*
- when the action finished in the past, but the effect is still felt in the present:
 - *He's **lost** his calculator (and he still hasn't found it).*
- with **for** and **since** to show the duration of an action or state up until the present:
 - *I **have worked** here since 1998.*
 - *She **hasn't bought** any new clothes for years.*
- in British English, with **just**, **ever**, **already** and **yet**:
 - *I've just **arrived**.*
 - ***Have** you ever **been** here before?*
 - *He's **already packed** his suitcases.*
 - ***Haven't** you **finished** yet?*
- NOTE** In informal American English the past simple can be used with **just**, **already** and **yet**:
 - *He **already packed** his suitcases.*
 - ***Didn't** you **finish** yet?*

The present perfect progressive is used:

- with **for** and **since** to talk about an activity that started in the past and is still happening:
 - *I've been working since eight o'clock.*
 - *He's been learning English for several years.*
- to talk about an activity that has finished, but whose results are visible now:
 - *My hands are dirty because I've been gardening.*

The past progressive is used:

- to talk about an action that was in progress at a particular time in the past:
 - *What were you doing in the summer of 1999?*
 - *Was it raining when you left home?*
- to talk about something that was already in progress when something else happened. (You use the past simple for the action that interrupts it):
 - *The doorbell rang while they were having breakfast.*

NOTE As with the present progressive, this tense cannot be used with 'state' verbs:

- *The fresh bread smelled wonderful* (not *was smelling*).

The past perfect is used:

- to talk about something that happened before another action in the past:
 - *I had already met Ed before he came to Bath.*
 - *When I got to the station, the train had left.*

The past perfect progressive is used:

- with **for** or **since** to talk about an activity that started at a time further back in the past than something else:
 - *She hadn't been living there very long when she met Mark.*
- to talk about an activity that had a result in the past:
 - *My hands were dirty because I had been gardening.*

Talking about the future

There are several ways of talking about the future.

The future simple (will with the infinitive) is used:

- to talk about a decision that you make as you are speaking:
 - *'It's cold in here.' 'OK, I'll close the window.'*
 - *I'll have the salad, please.*
- to talk about what you know or think will happen in the future (but not about your own intentions or plans):
 - *Her mother will be ninety next week.*
 - *Will he pass the exam, do you think?*
 - *This job won't take long.*

- for requests, promises and offers:
 - *Will you buy some bread on your way home?*
 - *We'll be back early, don't worry.*
 - *I'll help you with your homework.*

However, other tenses and expressions are also used to express a 'future' idea.

The present progressive is used:

- to talk about future plans where the time is mentioned:
 - *He's flying to Japan in August.*
 - *What are you doing this evening?*
 - *I'm not starting my new job till next Monday.*

Be going to with the infinitive is used:

- to talk about what you intend to do in the future:
 - *I'm going to phone Michael tonight.*
 - *What are you going to do when you leave school?*

About to with the infinitive is used:

- to talk about the very near future:
 - *Go and ask him quickly.*
 - *He's about to go out.*

The present simple is used:

- to refer to a future time after **when**, **as soon as**, **before**, **until**, etc.:
 - *Ring me as soon as you hear any news.*
 - *I'll look after Jo until you get back.*
 - *You'll recognize the street when you see it.*
- to talk about future plans where something has been officially arranged, for example on a timetable or programme:
 - *We leave Palma at 10 and arrive in Luton at 12.30.*
 - *School starts on 9 September.*

The future progressive is used:

- to talk about actions that will continue for a period of time in the future:
 - *I'll be waiting near the ticket office.*
 - *I'll be wearing a green hat.*
 - *This time next week you'll be relaxing in the sun!*
- to ask somebody about their plans or intentions:
 - *How many nights will you be staying?*
 - *Will you be flying back or going by train?*

The future perfect or the future perfect progressive is used:

- to talk about the duration of something that you will be looking back on at a particular time in the future:
 - *They'll have lived here for four years in May.*
 - *She'll have been working here for a year in October.*