

The Tenses and Their Main Meanings

(These are only the main meanings; for more complete information, see the section on each tense.)

Past Tenses

Simple Past

Main Meaning

- ◇ This action ended in the past.

*John **did** his homework last night.*

Note: Simple past is correct for most actions in the past. There are only a few times when we absolutely need to use other past tenses.

Past Progressive

Main Meaning

- ◇ This action happened over time in the past.

Most common use: to show this action was happening over time when something happened.

*John **was doing** his homework when the earthquake started.*

Past Perfect

Main Meaning

- ◇ We use past perfect when we want to make it clear that this action happened before something in the past.

*Norton **had eaten** breakfast when he left for work. (This means Norton ate breakfast before he went to work.)*

Past Perfect Progressive

Main Meaning

- ◇ We use past perfect progressive when we want to make it clear that this action was happening over time before something in the past.

*The kitchen smelled wonderful because Norton **had been cooking** dinner.*

Present Tenses

Simple Present

Main Meanings

- ◇ This action is a habit or repeated now.
*I usually **drive** to school.*
- ◇ This is a fact that's always (or almost always) true.
*Wood **floats** in water.*

Present Progressive

Main Meanings

- ◇ This action is happening right now.
*You **are reading** this sentence.*
- ◇ This action isn't finished, but might not be happening right now.
*John **is studying** English this semester, but he isn't studying right now; he's eating dinner.*

Note: Don't use present progressive with stative verbs.

Present Perfect

Main Meanings

- ◇ With a length of time, present perfect usually means this action started in the past and has continued until now.
*Ralph's a bus driver. He **has worked** as a bus driver for 10 years.*
Note: Present Perfect Progressive can often be used to say the same thing (but not with stative verbs).

- ◇ With no time phrase, present perfect usually means the action ended in the past, but the time is not clear.

*Ralph isn't hungry because he **has eaten** dinner.*

Note: In American English, simple past can usually be used to say the same thing.

Present Perfect Progressive

Main Meaning

- ◇ This action started in the past and has continued until now.
*Ralph's a bus driver. He **has been working** as a bus driver for 10 years.*

Note: Don't use present perfect progressive with stative verbs.

Future Tenses

Future

Main Meaning

- ◇ This action will happen in the future.

*Ralph and Norton **will play** cards tomorrow night.*

Note: Future is correct for most actions in the future. There are only a few times when I absolutely need to use other future tenses.

Future Progressive

Main Meaning

- ◇ This action will happen over time in the future.

Most common use: to show this action will be happening over time when something happens.

*I'll start to study at 7:00, so I'll **be studying** when you arrive at 7:10.*

Future Perfect

Main Meaning

- ◇ We use future perfect when we want to make it clear that this action will happen before something in the future.

*Martha **will have finished** her homework when she comes to class tomorrow.*

Note: If it's already clear which action will happen first, future is also okay.

Future Perfect Progressive

Main Meaning

- ◇ This action will happen over time before something in the future

*When I retire, I **will have been teaching** for over forty years.*

Note: Future perfect progressive is a pretty rare tense; we don't use it very much.

Which Verb Tense Should I Use?

A Very Rough Guide

Actions in the Past

For **most actions in the past**:

simple past

- ◇ I **ate** breakfast at 7:00 this morning before I **went** to work.
- ◇ I'm a little tired today because I **went** to bed late.

When I need to make it clear that this action was **in progress when something happened**:

past progressive

- ◇ I **was taking** a bath when you called, so I couldn't answer the phone.

When I want to show that an action **started in the past and has continued until now**:

present perfect progressive (for most verbs)

- ◇ I **have been teaching** at Chabot for fourteen years.
- ◇ John **has been thinking** about buying a new car.

OR

present perfect + a length of time (for stative verbs)

- ◇ George Bush Sr. **has hated** broccoli **since he was a child**.

When I want to show that an action happened **before something in the past**:

past perfect

- ◇ At 5:00, Fred **had finished** work for the day. (This means that Fred finished work before 5:00.)

(NOTE: We can say, At 5:00, Fred *finished* work for the day, but this sentence has a different meaning. It means that Fred finished work **at** 5:00, not before.)

When I need to make it clear that this action was happening **over time before another action (or a time) in the past:**

past perfect progressive (for most verbs)

- ◇ Barney **had been studying** for six hours when he fell asleep at his desk.

OR

past perfect + a length of time (for stative verbs)

- ◇ Ralph **had loved** Alice for many years before he asked her to marry him.

For actions that have **never happened in someone's life:**

present perfect

- ◇ I've never **seen** a flying elephant.

For questions asking **if someone has ever done something in their life:**

present perfect

- ◇ **Have** you **seen** the Grand Canyon?

For **repeated actions that might happen again:**

present perfect

- ◇ Hoku **has seen** that movie eight times.

Actions in the Present

For a **present habit**:

simple present

- ◇ *I **don't drive** to work; I usually **take** BART.*

For something that is **always or usually true**:

simple present

- ◇ *Wood **floats** on water.*
- ◇ *Rocks **don't float**. They **sink**.*

For an action happening **right now**:

present progressive (for most verbs)

- ◇ *Norton **isn't** home now. He's **studying** at the library.*

OR

simple present (for stative verbs only)

- ◇ *Right now, I **understand** my calculus homework, but tomorrow I may be confused again.*

For an action that **isn't finished yet**:

present progressive (for most verbs)

- ◇ *Martin **is working** at the library this semester, but he **isn't** there now because today's Sunday and library's closed.*

Actions in the Future

For **predictions** (things we think will happen):

future

- ◇ Fred's plane **will arrive** at 8:00.
- ◇ Fred's plane **is going to arrive** at 8:00.

For actions that will be ***happening over time when something happens***:

future progressive

- ◇ When Lucy's plane arrives tomorrow, Ricky **will be waiting** for her at the airport.

For **future plans**:

be going to

- ◇ Ralph and Alice **are going to visit** Yosemite National Park next month.

For **time clauses** and **if-clauses in the future**:

simple present (almost always)

- ◇ When Ralph **gets** home tomorrow night, he's going to take Alice out to dinner.
- ◇ If Yoko **buys** a car next Friday, she'll drive it to school on Monday.

When I need to make it clear that this action will be ***finished before***

something in the future:

future perfect

- ◇ The train always leaves at 12:00. If you get to the station at 12:05, the train **will have already left**.

When I need to make it clear that this action will happen ***over time before***
something in the future:

future perfect progressive (for most verbs)

- ◇ Next September, I **will have been working** at Chabot for 10 years.

OR

future perfect + a length of time (for stative verbs)

- ◇ At its anniversary in 2011, Chabot College **will have existed** for fifty years.