MPC English & Study Skills Center

Verb Tenses: Talking about the Past

Simple past: Verb + ed

The simple past tense is used to show actions that happened at a point in time in the past that is known or understood.

> **Note:** Time words: ago, in the past, at 6:30, last night, on Wednesday, etc.

> I <u>went</u> to San Francisco last week.

Simple past action + simple past action = sequential actions

> Tom <u>went</u> to the store and <u>bought</u> milk. *(Tom did two things in the order listed.)*

> Sarah <u>read</u>, <u>washed</u> dishes, and <u>watched</u> TV. *(Three things happened in this order.)*

Simple past action + simple past condition = sequential or simultaneous actions

> Jackson <u>worked</u> hard and <u>was</u> tired.
> *(It is possible that he worked hard and THEN became tired, but it is also possible that he was tired when he started.)*

> Mary was exhausted, but she worked for four hours.
> *(It seems that her exhaustion started first, but it might have been the result of the work.)*

Simple past condition + simple past condition = sequential or simultaneous actions

> Tessa <u>was</u> a teacher, and she <u>was</u> a mother.
> *(She was probably both things at the same time.)*

> Terry <u>was</u> a hard worker throughout his life. He <u>was</u> a laborer, a student, an engineer, a husband, and a father. *("Hard worker" is simultaneous with the other roles, but the positions—laborer, student, engineer, etc.—are probably sequential.)*

Past progressive: Be + verb + -ing

This tense is used to suggest that something or someone is in the middle of a continuing action in the past.

> **Note:** Time words: right then, while, for 2 hours (words similar to those show past time).

> I <u>was studying</u> last night for two hours.

Past progressive + past = longer action in progress in the past when another shorter action occurs

I was studying when the phone rang.
(The studying was already taking place when the phone rang.)

He was taking a shower when the fire started.
(Taking a shower is long action that is interrupted by fire.)

Past progressive + past progressive = simultaneous actions in the past

While you were working, he was talking on the phone. *(Both happened at the same time in the past.)*

Estella was doing her homework, and I was finishing dinner. *(Both happened at the same time in the past.)*

Present perfect: Have + past participle

This tense is used to show that something occurred in a time period before now at an unspecified time. If exact times are given, the past tense is used. The present perfect is also used to show a repetition of an activity in the past.

Note: Time words: already, just, recently, many times, for six weeks, since June

They have just finished their exercise class.

Present perfect + present perfect = sequential actions in a time period in the past

Henry has moved back home and has gotten a new job.
(The two actions occurred in order at a time period in the past.

Present perfect + past = actions occurring in a time period and at a point in time

Jake has worked for 12 hours, but I started 10 minutes ago. *(Jake's action took place over a period of time, but mine started at a specific point in time.)*

He has broken the limb on the tree that we planted last year. *(The breaking occurred in a time period before now, but the planting took place at a specific point in time.)*

Present perfect progressive: Have been + verb + -ing

This tense is used to show duration of an activity that began in the past and continues until right now or to show a general activity in progress recently.

> **Note:** Time words: similar to present perfect, already, just, etc.

> I have been watching TV for 6 hours straight. *(It occurred over a period of time up until now.)*

> She has been making a nuisance of herself. *(This is a general activity over a period of time until now.)*

Present perfect progressive + past = actions that began in the past and are in progress and something else occurs in the past at a point in time

> They have been talking for four hours, but their husbands fell asleep two hours ago. *(The first action took place over a time period that extends until now, but the second action occurred at a point in time.)*

> I have seen that movie many times. I last saw it in March. (*First actions occurred over a time period; last action occurred at a point in time.)*

Present perfect progressive + present perfect = two actions occurring over a period of time in the past, but one is in progress

> The telephone has been ringing for over 10 minutes, but I haven't been able to stop to answer it. *(The ringing started in the past and continues until now, but the inability to answer it has occurred over the time period at inexact times.)*

> The babies have been crying, but I have finished the paper. *(The crying continued and is still in progress, but at some time period before now, the paper was completed.)*

Present perfect progressive + present perfect progressive = actions starting in the past and continuing until now simultaneously

> Susie has been sleeping while I have been working. *(Both events started in the past and continue to now.)*

> Monroe and Stella have been talking, and the others have been painting the room. *(Two actions started in the past and continue to now.)*

Past perfect: Had + past participle

This tense is used to show that one action takes place and is completed before another action in the past. This tense is the past of the past, so the past perfect is used along with the past tense.

> **Note:** Time words: before, after (sometimes the time word is not stated) **Note:** "Before" and "after" can also be used with simple past tense if two events happen close together in time.

> I <u>had</u> already <u>eaten</u> breakfast.

> After I <u>ate</u> breakfast, I <u>left</u> for work.

Past perfect + past = two events in the past, one before the other

> The man <u>had looked</u> for his daughter for two years before he <u>found</u> her.
> *(The looking took place before the finding.)*

> I <u>saw</u> a lion at the animal park, but I <u>had forgotten</u> to bring my camera.
> *(The forgetting took place before the seeing of the lion.)*

Past perfect progressive: Had been + verb + -ing

This tense is used to show the duration of an activity was completed before another activity or time in the past, or it is used to show an action that was in progress shortly before another activity in the past.

> **Note:** Time words: for two years, since June, for a long time, all day, etc.

> She <u>had been working</u> for two years before she <u>got</u> a raise. *(The first action, working, continued up to the time of the second, getting the raise.)*

> When Donald <u>got</u> home, his hair <u>was</u> still wet because he <u>had been swimming</u>.
> *(A past action, got home, and condition, was wet, were preceded a short time before by his swimming.*

Past perfect progressive + past = continuing action to a point of time in the past

> He <u>had been sleeping</u> when she <u>arrived</u>. *(The sleeping occurred over a period of time that continued until the point when she arrived.)*

> Before I <u>left</u> the party, I <u>had been wondering</u> about my ability to drive.
> *(The wondering took place over a period of time before leaving.)*