

TENSES EXPLANATIONS





When should I use the Present Simple?

Present Uses

1: We use the present simple when something is generally or always true.

- People need food.
- It snows in winter here.
- Two and two make four.

2: Similarly, we need to use this tense for a situation that we think is more or less permanent. (See the present continuous for temporary situations.)

- Where do you live?
- She works in a bank.
- I don't like mushrooms.

3: The next use is for habits or things that we do regularly. We often use adverbs of frequency (such as 'often', 'always' and 'sometimes') in this case, as well as expressions like 'every Sunday' or 'twice a month'. (See the present continuous for new, temporary or annoying habits).

- Do you smoke?
- I play tennis every Tuesday.
- I don't travel very often.

4: We can also use the present simple for short actions that are happening now. The actions are so short that they are finished almost as soon as you've said the sentence. This is often used with sports commentary.

- He takes the ball, he runs down the wing, and he scores!

Future Uses

5: We use the present simple to talk about the future when we are discussing a timetable or a fixed plan. Usually, the timetable is fixed by an organisation, not by us.

- School begins at nine tomorrow.
- What time does the film start?
- The plane doesn't arrive at seven, it arrives at seven thirty.

6: We also use the present simple to talk about the future after words like 'when', 'until', 'after', 'before' and 'as soon as'. These are sometimes called subordinate clauses of time.

- I will call you when I have time. (Not '~~will have~~!')
- I won't go out until it stops raining.
- I'm going to make dinner after I watch the news.

Conditional Uses

7: We use the present simple in the first and the zero conditionals. (See the conditionals section for more information.)

- If it rains, we won't come.
- If you heat water to 100 degrees, it boils.



When should I use the Present Continuous?

Present Uses

1: First, we use the present continuous for things that are happening at the moment of speaking. These things usually last for quite a short time and they are not finished when we are talking about them.

- I'm working at the moment.
- Please call back as we are eating dinner now.
- Julie is sleeping.

2: We can also use this tense for other kinds of temporary situations, even if the action isn't happening at this moment.

- John's working in a bar until he finds a job in his field. (He might not be working now.)
- I'm reading a really great book.
- She's staying with her friend for a week.

Compare this with the present simple, which is used for permanent situations that we feel will continue for a long time.

- I work in a school. (I think this is a permanent situation.)
- I'm working in a school. (I think this is a temporary situation.)

3: We can use the present continuous for temporary or new habits (for normal habits that continue for a long time, we use the present simple). We often use this with expressions like 'these days' or 'at the moment'.

- He's eating a lot these days.
- She's swimming every morning (she didn't use to do this).
- You're smoking too much.

4: Another present continuous use is for habits that are not regular, but that happen very often. In this case we usually use an adverb like 'always', 'forever' or 'constantly'. Often, we use the present continuous in this way to talk about an annoying habit.

- You're forever losing your keys!
- She's constantly missing the train.
- Lucy's always smiling!

Future Uses

5: The next use is for definite future arrangements (with a future time word). In this case we have already made a plan and we are pretty sure that the event will happen in the future.

- I'm meeting my father tomorrow.
- We're going to the beach at the weekend.
- I'm leaving at three.

We can't use this tense (or any other continuous tense) with stative verbs.

When should we use the Present Perfect Simple?

Unfinished Actions

1: We use this tense when we want to talk about unfinished actions or states or habits that started in the past and continue to the present. Usually we use it to say 'how long' and we need 'since' or 'for'. We often use stative verbs.

- I've known Karen since 1994.
- She's lived in London for three years.
- I've worked here for six months.

'Since' and 'For'

We use 'since' with a fixed time in the past (2004, April 23rd, last year, two hours ago). The fixed time can be another action, which is in the past simple (since I was at school, since I arrived).

- I've known Sam since 1992.
- I've liked chocolate since I was a child.
- She's been here since 2pm.

We use 'for' with a period of time (2 hours, three years, six months).

- I've known Julie for ten years.
- I've been hungry for hours.
- She's had a cold for a week.

Finished Actions

2: Life experience. These are actions or events that happened sometime during a person's life. We don't say when the experience happened, and the person needs to be alive now. We often use the words 'ever' and 'never' here.

- I have been to Tokyo.
- They have visited Paris three times.
- We have never seen that film.

3: With an unfinished time word (this month, this week, today). The period of time is still continuing.

- I haven't seen her this month.
- She's drunk three cups of coffee today.
- I've already moved house twice this year!

We CAN'T use the present perfect with a finished time word.

- ~~I've seen him yesterday.~~

4: A finished action with a result in the present (focus on result). We often use the present perfect to talk about something that happened in the recent past, but that is still true or important now. Sometimes we can use the past simple here, especially in US English.

- I've lost my keys (so I can't get into my house).
- She's hurt her leg (so she can't play tennis today).
- They've missed the bus (so they will be late).

5: We can also use the present perfect to talk about something that happened recently, even if there isn't a clear result in the present. This is common when we want to introduce news and we often use the words 'just / yet / already / recently'. However, the past simple is also correct in these cases, especially in US English.

- The Queen has given a speech.
- I've just seen Lucy.
- The Mayor has announced a new plan for the railways.

Been and Gone

In this tense, we use both 'been' and 'gone' as the past participle of 'go', but in slightly different circumstances.

We use 'been' (often when we talk about life experience) to mean that the person we're talking about visited the place and came back.

- I've been to Paris (in my life, but now I'm in London, where I live).
- She has been to school today (but now she's back at home).
- They have never been to California.

We use 'gone' (often when we are talking about an action with a result in the present) to mean that the person went to the place and is at the place now.

- 'Where's John?' 'He's gone to the shops' (he's at the shops now).
- Julie has gone to Mexico (now she's in Mexico).
- They've gone to Japan for three weeks (now they're in Japan).



When should we use the Present Perfect Continuous?

Unfinished actions

1: To say how long for unfinished actions which started in the past and continue to the present. We often use this with 'for' and 'since'.

- I've been living in London for two years.
- She's been working here since 2004.
- We've been waiting for the bus for hours.

This use is very similar to how we use the present perfect simple, and often it's possible to use either tense. Of course, with stative verbs, we can't use the present perfect continuous.

- I've been here for hours.
- NOT: ~~I've been being here for hours.~~

2: For temporary habits or situations. The action started in the past and continues to the present in the same way as with use number 1, but we don't answer the questions about 'how long' so clearly. Instead, we use a word like 'recently'.

- I've been going to the gym a lot recently.
- They've been living with his mother while they look for a house.
- I've been reading a lot recently.

This is very similar to the use of the present continuous for temporary habits and often either tense is possible.

Finished actions

3: Actions which have recently stopped (though the whole action can be unfinished) and have a result, which we can often see, hear, or feel, in the present. We don't use a time word here.

- I'm so tired, I've been studying.
- I've been running, so I'm really hot.
- It's been raining so the pavement is wet.

The present perfect simple has a very similar use, which focuses on the result of the action, whereas the present perfect continuous focuses on the action itself. See my page about the difference between the present perfect simple and the present perfect continuous for more explanation.



When should we use the Past Simple?

This is the basic past tense. We use it whenever we want to talk about the past and we don't have any special situation that means we should use the past perfect, present perfect, past continuous, etc.

Finished actions, states or habits in the past.

1: We use it with finished actions, states or habits in the past when we have a finished time word (yesterday, last week, at 2 o'clock, in 2003).

- I went to the cinema yesterday.
- We spent a lot of time Japan in 2007.

2: We use it with finished actions, states or habits in the past when we know from general knowledge that the time period has finished. This includes when the person we are talking about is dead.

- Leonardo painted the Mona Lisa.
- The Vikings invaded Britain.

3: We use it with finished actions, states or habits in the past that we have introduced with the present perfect or another tense. This is sometimes called 'details of news'.

- I've hurt my leg. I fell off a ladder when I was painting my bedroom.

- I've been on holiday. I went to Spain and Portugal.

4: For stories or lists of events, we often use the past simple for the actions in the story and the past continuous for the background.

- He went to a café. People were chatting and music was playing. He sat down and ordered a coffee.

Unreal or imaginary things in the present or future.

5: We use the past simple to talk about things that are not real in the present or future. So we use it with the second conditional and after words like 'wish'.

- If I won the lottery, I would buy a house.
- I wish I had more time!

When should we use the Past Continuous (also called the Past Progressive)?

1: An action in the past which overlaps another action or a time. The action in the past continuous starts before and often continues after the other shorter action or time.

- I was walking to the station when I met John. (I started walking before I met John, and maybe I continued afterwards.)
- At three o'clock, I was working. (I started before three o'clock and finished after three o'clock.)

2: In the same way, we can use the present continuous for the background of a story. (We often use the past simple for the actions.) This is really a specific example of Use 1.

- The birds were singing, the sun was shining and in the cafés people were laughing and chatting. Amy sat down and took out her phone.

3: Temporary habits or habits that happen more often than we expect in the past. We often use 'always, constantly' or 'forever' here. This is the same as the way we use the present continuous for habits, but the habit started and finished in the past. This thing doesn't happen now.

- He was always leaving the tap running.
- She was constantly singing.

4: To emphasise that something lasted for a while. This use is often optional and we usually use it with time expressions like 'all day' or 'all evening' or 'for hours'.

- I was working in the garden all day.
- He was reading all evening.

Remember you can't use this tense or any continuous tense with stative verbs.



When should I use the Past Perfect Simple?

1: A finished action before a second point in the past.

- When we arrived, the film had started (= first the film started, then we arrived).

We usually use the past perfect to make it clear which action happened first. Maybe we are already talking about something in the past and we want to mention something else that is further back in time. This is often used to explain or give a reason for something in the past.

- I'd eaten dinner so I wasn't hungry.
- It had snowed in the night, so the bus didn't arrive.

If it's clear which action happened first (if we use the words 'before' or 'after', for example), the past perfect is optional.

- The film started before we arrived / the film had started before we arrived.

2: Something that started in the past and continued up to another action or time in the past. The past perfect tells us 'how long', just like the present perfect, but this time the action continues up to a point in the past rather than the present. Usually we use 'for + time'. We can also use the past perfect continuous here, so we most often use the past perfect simple with stative verbs.

- When he graduated, he had been in London for six years. (= He arrived in London six years before he graduated and lived there until he graduated, or even longer.)
- On the 20th of July, I'd worked here for three months.

3: To talk about unreal or imaginary things in the past. In the same way that we use the past simple to talk about unreal or imaginary things in the present, we use the past perfect (one step back in time) to talk about unreal things in the past. This is common in the third conditional and after 'wish'.

- If I had known you were ill, I would have visited you.
- She would have passed the exam if she had studied harder.
- I wish I hadn't gone to bed so late!



When should I use the Past Perfect Continuous?

1: Something that started in the past and continued up to another action or time in the past. The past perfect continuous tells us 'how long', just like the present perfect continuous, but this time the action continues up to a point in the past rather than the present. Usually we use 'for + time'. (We can also use the past perfect simple here, often with stative verbs.)

- She had been working at that company for a year when she met James.
- I'd been walking for hours when I finally found the house.
- We'd been living in Berlin for three months when we had to leave.

2: Something that finished just before another event in the past. This is usually used to show a result at a time in the past. It's very similar to the present perfect continuous, but the action finishes before another time in the past, rather than finishing before the present.

- The pavement was wet, it had been raining. (The rain had finished before the time I'm describing in the past. We could see the result of the rain.)
- The children had been playing and so the room was a mess!
- I'd been working before I saw you and that's why I was really tired.

When should I use the Future Simple?

Will

1: We use the future simple with 'will' to predict the future. It is the basic way we talk about the future in English, and we often use it if there is no reason to use another future tense. We can use it for future facts and for things that are less certain.

- The sun will rise at 7am.
- I think the Conservatives will win the next election.

2: Promises / requests / refusals / offers. This is sometimes called 'volitional' will. It's about wanting to do something or not wanting to do something in the future.

- I'll help you with your homework.
- Will you give me a hand?
- I won't go!

In a similar way, we often use 'will' when we're talking about a decision at the moment of speaking. We are usually making an offer or promise or talking about something that we want to do.

- A: I'm cold. B: I'll close the window.

3: We use the simple future with 'will' in the first conditional, and in other sentences that have a conditional feeling.

- If it doesn't rain, we'll go to the park.

- Let's arrive early. That will give us time to relax.

Shall

'Shall' is used mainly in the forms 'shall I?' and 'shall we?' in British English. These forms are used when you want to get someone's opinion, especially for offers and suggestions.

- Shall I open the window? (= Do you want me to open the window?)
- Where shall we go tonight? (= What's your opinion?)

Be going to

1: We often use 'be going to' to talk about our future intentions and plans. We have usually made our plans before the moment of speaking.

- A: We've run out of milk. B: I know, I'm going to buy some.

2: We can also use 'be going to' to make a prediction about the future. Often it's possible to use both 'be going to' and 'will' but it's more common to use 'be going to' if we can see evidence in the present.

- Look at those boys playing football! They're going to break the window.
- The sky is getting darker and darker. It's going to rain.



When should I use the Future Continuous?

1: We use the future continuous to talk about an action in the future that overlaps another, shorter action or a time. The action in the future continuous usually starts before and might continue after the second action or time. This is very similar to how we use the past continuous in the past. The verb after 'when' is usually in the present simple.

- I'll be waiting when you arrive.
- At eight o'clock, I'll be eating dinner.

2: We can use the future continuous to talk about something that will happen if everything happens as we expect. This is sometimes called 'future as a matter of course'. It's usually possible to choose the future simple as well, but we often choose the future continuous because then it's clear that we are not making a request or offer.

- The Government will be making a statement later.
- When will you be leaving? (This is more polite than 'when will you leave?' because it's definitely not a request for you to leave.)

Remember, we can't use the future continuous with stative verbs, so if we want to use a stative verb in one of the situations where we need to the future continuous, then we use the future simple with 'will'.

When should I use the Future Perfect Simple?

1: We use the future perfect to say 'how long' for an action that starts before and continues up to another action or time in the future. Usually we need 'for'. We can also use the future perfect continuous here so we often use the future perfect simple with stative verbs. If we use 'when', we usually need the present simple.

- When we get married, I'll have known Robert for four years.
- At 4 o'clock, I'll have been in this office for 24 hours.

Sometimes we could also use the present perfect in the same situation. But we like to use the future perfect to make the time an easy number.

- I've lived here for 11 months and three weeks. (This is correct, but the time is not an easy number.)
- On Tuesday, I will have lived here for one year. (A much easier number.)

2: We use the future perfect with a future time word, (and often with 'by') to talk about an action that will finish before a certain time in the future, but we don't know exactly when.

- By 10 o'clock, I will have finished my homework. (= I will finish my homework some time before 10, but we don't know exactly when.)
- By the time I'm sixty, I will have retired. (= I will retire sometime before I'm sixty. Maybe when I'm fifty-nine, maybe when I'm fifty-two.)

When should I use the Future Perfect Continuous?

1: Just like with the other perfect continuous tenses, we can use the future perfect continuous to say ‘how long’ for an action that continues up to another point in the future. The second point can be a time or another action. Generally, we need ‘for + length of time’ and if we use ‘when’ or ‘by the time’, we usually use the present simple.

- In April, she will have been teaching for twelve years.
- By the time you arrive, I’ll have been cooking for hours!

In the same way as with the future perfect simple, we often use the future perfect continuous because we like easy numbers. It’s also possible to use the present perfect continuous, but then we get a more complicated number.

- I’ve been working here for 11 months and three weeks. (This is correct, but the time is not an easy number.)
- On Tuesday, I will have been working here for one year. (A much easier number.)

2: We can use the future perfect continuous, like the other perfect continuous tenses, to talk about something that finishes just before another time or action (in this case, in the future). It’s often used because there will be a result at the second point in the future. (Again, if we use ‘when’ we usually need the present simple.)

- When I see you, I’ll have been studying, so I’ll be tired.