

## 3.04 Talking about the past

The four main tenses to talk specifically about the past are:

**SIMPLE PAST** (I looked), **PAST PROGRESSIVE** (I was looking), **PAST PERFECT** (I had worked) and **PAST PERFECT PROGRESSIVE** (I had been working).

There are also two tenses which are a mixture of the past and present:

**PRESENT PERFECT** (I have looked) **PRESENT PERFECT PROGRESSIVE** (I have been looking).

Other ways to talk about the past include use of *used to* and *would*.

The simple past is by far the most common tense used. Check out the list of irregular verb forms if necessary, and also see guide 3.06 on using active and passive verbs if necessary.

Below we will concentrate on the areas which cause most problems for students in their writing. As with all tense use, while you are writing continually ask yourself what time period you are referring to and make sure that you are consistent with tense use. If you use the simple past, for example, it means that the event or situation is over.

### Simple past or present perfect?

Pay attention here if your first language uses these tenses differently!

The **simple past** is used to refer to events, actions or situations in a **completed** time period in the past:

*The treaty **was signed** in 1913. She **left** home when she **was** 18 and **decided** to travel round Europe. The phone **rang** a couple of minutes ago - I thought you **were** in the office.*

The **present perfect** would be incorrect in all the above examples. This is because the present perfect is used to refer to events, actions or situations in an **uncompleted** time period (which is not always explicitly stated); with the present perfect there is always a link with the present. Compare the following:

*I **have seen** the film *To Be Or Not To Be* five times. (ie, in my life, uncompleted!)*

*I **saw** *Casablanca* on TV last night (last night, completed)*

*Birmingham **has been** an important city since the nineteenth century (uncompleted time; it still is)*

*Before the Industrial Revolution Birmingham **was** a small town.* (completed time; the Industrial Revolution is over)

*I've **been** to a lot of concerts recently.* (recently includes now)

*I **didn't go** to any concerts while I was in France.* (my time in France is over)

The simple past, therefore, is very often used with expressions of time such as in *19xx, last year/month/week etc, a second/week/year etc ago etc etc*: in fact, any expression or idea (explicit or implicit) that indicates that the time period is finished.

The present perfect, on the other hand, is often found with expressions such as *this year, for x years, since 19xx, today etc.*

The simple past is used to talk about the origin of something present. For example:

*Who **gave** you that beautiful necklace?*

*The music you're listening to **was composed** by Schubert.*

If you choose the wrong tense you could change the meaning completely. There's a very big difference between these two sentences:

*I **loved** you for 10 years.*

*I **have loved** you for 10 years.*

If you're not sure what this difference is, try the practice exercise.

Finally, forget misleading "rules" that you may have been taught in the past, such as that the present perfect is only used for recent time, or that it cannot be used to refer to "definite" time: neither is true.

## Simple past or past progressive?

The past progressive is usually used to "set the scene"; to describe the circumstances, that is, to say what *was happening* when something else *happened* or what *was happening* at a particular moment. It is NOT used as a kind of "imperfect" tense to talk about repeated or habitual actions: the simple past is used for this.

Look at these examples:

**CIRCUMSTANCES** *They **were completing** the final part of their research...*

**EVENT** *when their rivals **announced** they had found a cure.*

**CIRCUMSTANCES** *The British economy **was beginning** to recover...*

**EVENT** *when the collapse of the German Central Bank **brought** worldwide chaos.*

**CIRCUMSTANCES** *The room **was spinning** round...*  
**EVENT** *when **I went** to bed.*

Again, confusing your tenses could change the meaning. If in the last example you said "The room span round when I went to bed", this would mean that the spinning only started when you went to bed, not that it was happening at the time.

One other use is to describe two temporary events going on simultaneously in the past:

*While Blair's popularity **was steadily increasing**, Hague **was becoming** more unpopular by the day.*

Try the exercise for some practice.

## Simple past or past perfect?

The main use for the past perfect is to talk about the "past of the past", to go back to an earlier point in time when we are already talking about the past:

*When I **arrived** at 10.15, the meeting **had already started**. I **had just finished** watching the weather forecast when it **started** to snow.*

In the first example, if you had said "When I arrived the meeting **started**", this would mean that everyone had waited for you before starting the meeting, rather than going ahead without you.

The use of the past perfect has nothing to do with distance in time: it can refer to a few minutes ago, or a few million years ago.

## Exercise: Simple past vs present perfect

Fill in the gaps with a suitable form of the verb supplied. Don't forget to check if an active/passive verb is needed, or one in a simple/progressive form.

1. The site \_\_\_\_\_ (*run*) for over two years now and is enjoying great success.
2. Hostilities \_\_\_\_\_ (*break out*) in 1966 after a long period of unrest.
3. Sheriyar \_\_\_\_\_ (*be*) President from 1983 to 1994; his successor, Solanki, although still technically in power, \_\_\_\_\_ (*be*) in exile since 1996.
4. The trial \_\_\_\_\_ (*adjourn*) after 10 minutes as the judge \_\_\_\_\_ (*decide*) he \_\_\_\_\_ (*need*) to speak with the defence team.
5. Many new discoveries \_\_\_\_\_ (*make*) recently. For example, it is now known that Shakespeare \_\_\_\_\_ (*write*) Hamlet 10 years earlier than first thought.
6. Do you fancy going to the cinema? \_\_\_\_\_ (*see*) *Something Wild*?
7. \_\_\_\_\_ (*watch*) the athletics on TV last night?
8. During the past 5 years there \_\_\_\_\_ (*be*) a steady increase in the number of hayfever sufferers.
9. I \_\_\_\_\_ (*check*) my work three times and I still keep finding mistakes.
10. England \_\_\_\_\_ (*win*) the World Tiddlywinks Championship five times, but in the last competition they \_\_\_\_\_ (*knocked out*) in the first round.

## Answers: Simple past vs present perfect

1. The site **HAS BEEN RUNNING** for over two years now and is enjoying great success.  
*The site is still running.*
2. Hostilities **BROKE OUT** in 1966 after a long period of unrest.  
*In 1966: a finished period/point of time.*
3. Sheriyar **WAS** President from 1983 to 1994; his successor, Solanki, although still technically in power, **HAS BEEN** in exile since 1996.  
*Sheriyar is no longer President; Solanki is still President.*
4. The trial **WAS ADJOURNED** after 10 minutes as the judge **DECIDED** he **NEEDED** to speak with the defence team.  
*This all happened in the past, so you use the simple past.*
5. Many new **discoveries HAVE BEEN MADE** recently. For example, it is now known that Shakespeare **WROTE** Hamlet 10 years earlier than first thought.  
*In the first part the present perfect is used as the word 'recently' establishes a link with the present (we are interested in the results of these discoveries now). In the second part, Shakespeare did his writing in a completed period of time.*
6. Do you fancy going to the cinema? **HAVE YOU SEEN** Something Wild?  
*'Have you seen ...' refers to recently or to your life as a whole; the period of time is therefore unfinished.*
7. **DID YOU WATCH** the athletics on TV last night?  
*'Last night' is completed.*
8. During the past 5 years there **HAS BEEN** a steady increase in the number of hayfever sufferers.  
*'The past five years' includes now, so the period of time is unfinished.*
9. **I HAVE CHECKED** my work three times and I still keep finding mistakes.  
*The process of checking has probably not finished; three times up to now.*
10. England **HAVE WON** the World Tiddlywinks Championship five times, but in the last competition they **WERE KNOCKED OUT** in the first round.  
*'Have won' because the competition is still running and they have the chance to win again. 'Were knocked out' because the last competition is over.*

## Exercise: Simple past vs past progressive

Fill in the correct form of the verb supplied.

1. When the lecturer \_\_\_\_\_ (*enter*) the hall, most of the students \_\_\_\_\_ (*have*) their lunch.
2. While I \_\_\_\_\_ (*overtake*) the coach, someone \_\_\_\_\_ (*throw*) a bottle out of the window.
3. When I was young, we \_\_\_\_\_ (*went*) to the beach in Wales every summer.
4. I \_\_\_\_\_ (*finish*) what I thought was the last question when I \_\_\_\_\_ (*realise*) I had missed out a whole section.
5. He \_\_\_\_\_ (*join*) the company when he was 21 and \_\_\_\_\_ (*work*) there until his retirement 44 years later.
6. I noticed with horror that while the dentist \_\_\_\_\_ (*work*) on my teeth he \_\_\_\_\_ (*look*) out of the window at the garden.
7. While the awards \_\_\_\_\_ (*made*) at least six mobile phones \_\_\_\_\_ (*go off*), which greatly annoyed the rest of the audience.
8. The train \_\_\_\_\_ (*cross*) the bridge just as it \_\_\_\_\_ (*collapse*).
9. As I \_\_\_\_\_ (*download*) the last file my computer \_\_\_\_\_ (*freeze*).
10. What \_\_\_\_\_ (*dream*) about when you \_\_\_\_\_ (*wake up*) suddenly last night?

## Answers: Simple past vs past progressive

1. When the lecturer **ENTERED** the hall, most of the students **WERE HAVING** their lunch.
2. While I **WAS OVERTAKING** the coach, someone **THREW** a bottle out of the window.
3. When I was young, we **WENT (/WOULD GO/USED TO GO)** to the beach in Wales every summer.
4. I **WAS FINISHING** what I thought was the last question when I **REALISED** I had missed out a whole section.
5. He **JOINED** the company when he was 21 and **WORKED** there until his retirement 44 years later.
6. I noticed with horror that while the dentist **WAS WORKING** on my teeth he **WAS LOOKING** out of the window at the garden.
7. While the awards **WERE BEING MADE** at least six mobile phones **WENT OFF** , which greatly annoyed the rest of the audience.
8. The train **WAS CROSSING** the bridge just as it **COLLAPSED**.
9. As I **WAS DOWNLOADING** the last file my computer **FROZE**.
- 10.10 What **WERE YOU DREAMING** about when you **WOKE UP** suddenly last night?

## Exercise: Simple past vs past perfect

Put in the correct form of the verb supplied

1. I \_\_\_\_\_ (*know*) Clarence for over five years when he \_\_\_\_\_ (*admit*) that he was a male stripper.
2. When the match finally \_\_\_\_\_ (*start*) half of the crowd \_\_\_\_\_ (*already leave*).
3. When she \_\_\_\_\_ (*go*) to Australia to see her daughter, it was the first time she \_\_\_\_\_ (*fly*) in her life.
4. The school \_\_\_\_\_ (*just finish*) its extension programme when the local authority \_\_\_\_\_ (*announce*) its closure.
5. Even though I \_\_\_\_\_ (*tell*) him many times previously not to plagiarise, he \_\_\_\_\_ (*continue*) to do it and was eventually expelled.
6. She \_\_\_\_\_ (*try*) to pass her driving test for over ten years when she finally \_\_\_\_\_ (*decide*) it was a waste of time.
7. Although she \_\_\_\_\_ (*always be*) afraid of heights, she was persuaded to try a balloon flight for her birthday.
8. People \_\_\_\_\_ (*just get used to*) the new telephone numbers when BT \_\_\_\_\_ (*say*) that they were going to change again.
9. Although we \_\_\_\_\_ (*not get*) back until 3am this morning, we all agreed we \_\_\_\_\_ (*have*) a fantastic time.
10. We \_\_\_\_\_ (*go*) to the same hotel for over twenty years and \_\_\_\_\_ (*be*) very disappointed to discover it \_\_\_\_\_ (*close*) .

## Answers: Simple past vs past perfect exercise

1. **I HAD KNOWN** Clarence for over five years when he **ADMITTED** that he was a male stripper.
2. When the match finally **STARTED** half of the crowd **HAD ALREADY LEFT**.
3. When she **WENT** to Australia to see her daughter, it was the first time she **HAD FLOWN** in her life.
4. The school **HAD JUST FINISHED** its extension programme when the local authority **ANNOUNCED** its closure.
5. Even though I **HAD TOLD** him many times previously not to plagiarise, he **CONTINUED** to do it and was eventually expelled.
6. She **HAD TRIED** to pass her driving test for over ten years when she finally **DECIDED** it was a waste of time.
7. Although she **HAD ALWAYS BEEN** afraid of heights, she was persuaded to try a balloon flight for her birthday.
8. People **HAD JUST GOT USED** the new telephone numbers when BT **SAID** that they were going to change again.
9. Although we **DIDN'T GET** back until 3am this morning, we all agreed we **HAD HAD** a fantastic time.
10. We **HAD BEEN GOING/HAD GONE** to the same hotel for over twenty years and **WERE** very disappointed to discover it **HAD (BEEN) CLOSED**.