

English Grammar: Tenses

In a sentence, Tense is used to give you an idea of the time when the action mentioned in the sentence occurred. We can say that tenses are the soul of English Grammar. Until you are well aware of different tenses, you cannot form or understand sentences.

In Grammar, we use 'Tenses' to define the time of occurring of the action. Tenses tell us when something happens, the time of an action (verb). The verb comes in three tenses;

Present Tense: The present tense is used to describe things that are happening right now or things that are continuous. For example:

- He **is eating** Pasta. (Presently he is doing this act of eating)

Past Tense: The past is used to describe things that have already happened (e.g., earlier in the day, yesterday, last week, ten years ago).

- He **ate** Pasta (He has already done the action of eating)

Future Tense: The actions which we are going to do/will do/planning to do are termed as 'Future tense' sentences.

- He **will eat** Pasta (He is going to do the action of eating)

The tenses are further sub categorised as:

- *Simple tenses* show moments in time, timeless states, and habitual or repetitive actions. **E.g. Ravi usually walks to school; Yesterday Ravi went by car.**
- *Continuous tenses* show duration or continuity. **E.g. It is raining hard this even.**
- The *present perfect tense* shows that an action is completed but that it still has some importance in the present time. **E.g. She has missed the flight. (That's why she's not here.)**
- *Perfect continuous tenses* show duration, completion, and importance in the present time. **E.g. I have been working hard in the garden all day.**

This results in a total of 12 types of Tenses, which are described as following:

Present Tense

1) Simple Present Tense:

Structure: Subject + Base Verb

3rd person singular takes s/es with the verb.

This tense is used when we want to describe an action that is happening at present. But this tense does not indicate when that action is expected to end. The simple present tense is used when:

- an action happens every day/every time/every week/every month/every year
- To indicate universal truth
- To talk about fixed actions
- To give commands and directions
- **Catchwords for Simple Present Tense:** usually, often, sometimes, seldom, always, rarely, never, every day, every week, every time, on Mondays, etc

Simple Present Tense

Affirmative Sentence

For Singular Subject: This train leaves at eight in the morning.

For Plural Subject: These girls go to dancing class every day

Negative Sentence

This train **does not leave** at eight in the morning.

These girls **do not go** to dancing class every day.

Interrogative Sentence

Does this train **leave** at eight in the morning?

Do these girls go to dancing class every day?

2) Present Continuous Tense:

Structure: S+ is/am/are + Present participle+ O

If an action that is going on at the time of speaking means if an action is in continuation or progression at present then we use Present Continuous Tense. This is also known as present progressive tense

Present continuous tense is used when:

- An action that is happening while we speak
- When an action or plan is fixed
- Any action in continuation not necessarily while we speak
- With "always, forever and constantly"

Present Continuous Tense

Affirmative Sentence

For Singular Subject: She is doing her homework now

For Plural Subject: They are doing their homework now.

Negative Sentence

She is **not doing** her homework now.

They **are not doing** their homework now.

Interrogative Sentence

Is she doing her homework now?

Are they doing their homework now?

Catchwords for Present continuous tense: now, right now, this quarter, etc.

Exceptions:

There are some important exceptions in verbs when it comes to using them as continuous tenses. These verbs are called stative verbs and fall into a few categories:



Verbs of perception: e.g., see, hear, smell, recognize, taste etc.

Verbs of emotion: e.g., love, hate, hope, refuse, prefer etc.

Verbs of Mental state: e.g., think, suppose, believe, agree, consider, trust etc.

3) Present Perfect Tense:

Structure: S + have/has + past participle + O

- To indicate completed activities in the past.
- To express past action without a definite time reference.
- To express past action when we think more of their effects in the present than of the action itself.
- To denote an action beginning at some point in the past and continuing up to the present moment (often with since and for phrases)

Present Perfect Tense

Affirmative Sentence

Negative Sentence

Interrogative Sentence

For Singular Subject: He has completed his graduation in 2014. He has not completed his graduation in 2014. Has he completed his graduation in 2014?

For Plural Subject: They have completed their graduation in 2014. They have not completed their graduation in 2014. Have they completed their graduation in 2014?

Catchwords for Present Perfect Tense: just, ever, never, already, yet,

4) Present Perfect Continuous Tense:

Structure: S + have/has + been + past participle + O

Present Perfect Continuous Tense is used for a situation that has occurred in the past and is still continuing

Present Perfect Continuous Tense

Affirmative Sentence

Negative Sentence

Interrogative Sentence

For Singular Subject: Riya has been going to dance class since March. Riya has not been going to dance class since March. Has Riya not been going to dance class since March?

For Plural Subject: I have been reading this awesome novel for two months. I have not been reading this awesome novel for two months. Have you been reading this awesome novel for two months?

Catchwords for Present Perfect Continuous tense: for, since, lately

Past Tense



5) Simple Past Tense :

Structure: S+ V2 +O

- To describe an action of the past, we use Simple past tense. In this tense, the regular verb ends with an '-ed'. Also, some verbs end differently, for example for 'eat', we use 'Ate' in the simple past tense (irregular verbs)
- Also used for indicating past habits

Simple Past Tense

Affirmative Sentence

Negative Sentence

Interrogative Sentence

For Singular Subject: Raman went for the movie yesterday. Raman did not go for the movie yesterday. Did Raman go for the movie yesterday?

For Plural Subject: They went to the movie yesterday. They did not go to the movie yesterday. Did they go to the movie yesterday?

Catchwords for Simple Past Tense: yesterday, last week, last month, this morning (when meaning is past), etc, but sometimes this tense is also used without an adverb of time also. (E.g., I learnt Urdu in Kashmir.)

6) Past Continuous Tense :

Structure: S + was/were +V4 +O

Past continuous tense is used in those sentences in which the actions have already happened in the past and have been completed before the time of mention. These sentences are formed with the help of an auxiliary verb and giving the main verb an 'ing' ending.

Past Continuous Tense

Affirmative Sentence

Negative Sentence

Interrogative Sentence

For Singular Subject: She was watching TV when he called her. She was not watching TV when he called her. Was she watching TV when you called her?

For Plural Subject: They were watching the match together. They were not watching the match together. Were they watching the match together?

Catchwords for Past Continuous Tense: while

7) Past Perfect Tense :

Structure: S + had +past participle +O

This tense refers to a noncontinuous action that was already completed in the past. Such sentences are formed by using the Simple Past form of the auxiliary verb 'to have', followed by the past participle form of the verb.

Past Perfect Tense

Affirmative Sentence

For Singular Subject: He had read this book.

Negative Sentence

He had not read this book.

Interrogative Sentence

Had he read the book?

For Plural Subject: They had done their work.

They had not done their work.

Had they not done their work?

Catchwords for Past Perfect Tense: already, before, by the time

8) Past Perfect Continuous Tense :

Structure: S + had been + present participle + O

A continuous action that was completed sometime in the past falls under Past Perfect Continuous tense. Such sentences are framed by using the modal, 'had' + 'been' + the present participle of the verb (-ing).

Past Perfect Continuous Tense

Affirmative Sentence

For Singular Subject: He had been playing chess all morning.

Negative Sentence

He had been playing chess all morning.

Interrogative Sentence

Had he not been playing chess all morning?

For Plural Subject: They had been surfing the net all night.

They had not been surfing the net all night.

Had they been surfing the net all night?

Catchwords for Past Perfect Continuous Tense: for, since

Future Tense

9) Simple Future Tense :

Structure: S + will/shall + Base verb +O

This tense is used for those sentences which refer to the actions which will occur later, in future. This requires a future tense auxiliary verb even though the verb would be unmarked.

Simple Future Tense

Affirmative Sentence

For Singular Subject: She will cook tomorrow.

Negative Sentence

She will not cook tomorrow.

Interrogative Sentence

Will she cook tomorrow?

For Plural Subject: All the girls will take part in cooking classes tomorrow.

All the girls will not take part in cooking classes tomorrow.

Will All the girls take part in cooking classes tomorrow?



10)Future Continous Tense:

S + will/shall + Present participle +O

This tense defines those acts which will be continued at a future point in time. In order to form a future continuous tense sentence, a future auxiliary verb is required followed by the main verb that ends with '-ing.'

Future Continous Tense

Affirmative Sentence

Negative Sentence

Interrogative Sentence

For Singular Subject: He will be going to Shimla next week. He will not be going to Shimla next week. Will he be going to Shimla next week?

For Plural Subject: They will be celebrating her birthday on coming Monday. They will not be celebrating her birthday on coming Monday. Will they be celebrating her birthday on coming Monday?

11) Future Perfect Tense:

Structure: S + will/shall +have + past participle +O

This tense is used to express an action that is predicted to be finished within a certain span of time in the future. Such sentences are formed by 'will' + 'have' + 'past participle of the verb'.

Future Perfect Tense

Affirmative Sentence

Negative Sentence

Interrogative Sentence

For Singular Subject: She will have gone by the time you reach her home. She will not have gone by the time you reach her home. Will she have gone by the time you reach her home?

For Plural Subject: They will have gone by the time you reach her home. They will not have gone by the time you reach her home. Will they have gone by the time you reach her home?

Catchwords for Future Perfect Tense: when, by the time

12) Future Perfect Continuous Tense:

Structure: S + will/shall +have been +Present participle +O

This tense form indicates an action that is continuous and, at some point in the future, it will be completed. It is formed using the modal 'will/shall' + 'have' + 'been' + 'the past participle of the verb (-ing)'.

Future Perfect Continuous Tense

Affirmative Sentence

Negative Sentence

Interrogative Sentence



For Singular Subject: Riya will not have been studying English for two hours by the time you arrive here. Riya will have been studying English for two hours by the time you arrive here.

For Plural Subject: Students will not have been playing cricket since morning at this time tomorrow. Will students have been playing cricket since morning at this time tomorrow?

Catchwords for Future Perfect Continuous Tense: for, by the time

Important Rules of Tenses:

Below mentioned are some important rules and the most common errors of Tenses in English Grammar:

1) Do not get confused between the use of Present continuous tense and Present perfect continuous Tense. To indicate an action that started in the past has gone on till the present and is still continuing, we use the present perfect continuous tense. Using 'Present continuous tense in such sentences is incorrect. For example:

- Incorrect: It is raining for two days.
- Correct: It **has been raining** for two days.

- Incorrect: The baby is sleeping for three hours now.
- Correct: The baby **has been sleeping** for three hours now.

2) Do not get confused between present perfect tense/the past perfect tense and simple past tense. In a sentence, with adverbs of past time like, 'last week', 'last Monday', 'yesterday', 'last night' etc, always use simple past tense. Using Present perfect tense is incorrect in these sentences. The present perfect tense is to denote an action that continued in present too. The past perfect tense is only used to talk about the earlier two past actions. For example:

- Incorrect: I have seen him yesterday.
- Incorrect: I had seen him yesterday.
- Correct: I **saw** him yesterday.

- Incorrect: He has returned from Paris last week.
- Incorrect: He had returned from Paris last week.
- Correct: He **returned** from Paris last week.

3) When in a sentence, the verb in the main clause is in the future tense, then the verb in the subordinate clause must be in the present tense and not in the future tense.

- Incorrect: I will call you when the dinner will be ready.
- Correct: I will call you when the dinner **is** ready.

- Incorrect: He will help if you will ask him.
- Correct: He will help if you **ask** him.

4) If something has happened some time ago, then always use 'Simple Past tense' to indicate such activity. Often students use past perfect tense in such cases, which is incorrect. For example:

- Incorrect: I **had been** to New York recently.
- Correct: I **went** to New York recently.

- Incorrect: I **had written** to him last week.
- Correct: I **wrote** to him last week.

- Incorrect: We **had gone** to the pictures last night.
- Correct: We **went** to the pictures last night.

5) The sentences which indicate that something started in the past and continued up until another time in the past, always use Past perfect continuous tense. Many students often use past continuous or Simple past in such sentences, which is incorrect to use. For example:

- Incorrect: He said that he was suffering from fever for three days.
- Correct: He said that he **had been suffering** from a fever for three days.

- Incorrect: The man complained that his watch was stolen.
- Correct: The man complained that his watch **had been stolen**.

- Incorrect: The doctor concluded that the man died twelve hours ago.
- Correct: The doctor concluded that the man **had died** twelve hours ago.