

## Verb Tenses; A Simple Guide to Use and Identification

Tense is a term used for verbs, and refers to the time or duration of events in the sentence. For this handout, we will concentrate only on aspects of tense that are easily observable. Each tense will be explained in terms of function; in other words, we will show how each tense is used to convey time or duration of events. A useful way to study tenses is to obtain a chart that shows the four principle parts of English verbs used in forming tenses: the simple form, the simple past, the past participle, and the present participle. Some verbs have irregular simple past and past participle forms. A useful rule to remember is that the tense of a verb is always revealed by the first or only word in the verb phrase.

### 1. The simple tenses: simple present, simple past, and simple future

The simple present, formed from the simple form of the verb, is used for an event that happens on a habitual or recurring basis, or for something that is generally true. The simple past, formed from the simple past form of the verb, is used for an event that happened one time in the past. The simple future, indicated by the words "will" or a form of "be going to" is for an event that will happen one time in the future.

- 1.1 Sally studies every day. (Simple present; Tim studies more than once; he does it again and again.)
- 1.2 Mastering any subject takes time. (Simple present; the sentence states a general truth.)
- 1.3 Janet watched the movie. (Simple past; she watched the movie one time.)
- 1.4 Rita sang in the choir. (Simple past; although Rita may have sung more than once, we are only told about one time. Note the irregular past tense form of the verb.)
- 1.5 Jack will finish the book tomorrow. (Simple future; Jack will finish only one time.)
- 1.6 I am going to paint the house next week. (Simple future; expresses a plan or prediction for a one-time event.)

### 2. The progressive tenses: present progressive, past progressive, and future progressive

A simple way to think about the progressive tenses is that the action is ongoing; the event didn't just occur one time, but continued on for awhile. In the case of the present progressive, this action may even continue into the future, although the sentence may not tell us that. Progressive tenses are usually expressed as a form of "be" used as a helping verb, followed by a present participle, which always ends in "ing." The helping verb, being the first word in the verb phrase, always shows when the action occurs. The future progressive can also use a form of the word string "be going to + be + -ing" to express future action, as in sentence 2.6 below.

- 2.1 Beth is dancing for her friends. (Present progressive; the word "is" indicates the action is happening now, and is continuing.)
- 2.2 The Russians are charming the UN delegation. (Present progressive; the word "are" indicates the action is happening now, and is continuing.)
- 2.3 John Travolta was dancing at the ballroom. (Past progressive; the word "was" tells us the action occurred some time in the past, and continued for awhile.)
- 2.4 I was walking down the street when it started raining. (Past progressive; "was" indicates ongoing action in the past.)
- 2.5 I will be studying when you come at eight. (Future progressive; "will" indicates ongoing action in the future.)
- 2.6 I am going to be studying at the library tomorrow. (Future progressive; the ongoing action is in the future.)

### 3. The perfect tenses: present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect

Perfect tenses are used in situations where one event happens before another event. Usually the event itself only happens once, but situation described continues until another event happens. The writer should strive to include information in the sentence to make the sequence of events clear to the reader; the context is very important. In the present perfect, the "second event" is assumed to be the present moment, and the situation might even continue into the future. The perfect tenses always use the words "have" or "had" followed by a past participle.

- 3.1 The agreement between the partners has unraveled. (Present perfect; the agreement unraveled once in the past, and the situation has continued up to the present moment.)
- 3.2 Mary started a letter, but she still has not finished it. (Present perfect; she started the letter once in the past, and up to the present moment she has not finished it.)
- 3.3 The astrologer had predicted an earthquake on June 16<sup>th</sup>. (Past perfect; the prediction happened once, the time of the earthquake followed. However, we don't know if the earthquake actually happened.)
- 3.4 James had already left by the time Pedro got there. (Past perfect; James left, then Pedro arrived.)
- 3.5 By the time summer comes, I will have graduated. (Future perfect; "will" indicates the future; the graduation occurs once before the event of summer.)
- 3.6 By the year 2098, the automobile will have become obsolete. (Future perfect; the prediction says the auto will first be obsolete, followed by the advent of the year 2098.)

#### 4. The perfect progressive tenses: present perfect progressive; past perfect progressive; future perfect progressive

The progressive aspect and the perfect aspect of verb tenses can occur separately, or in various combinations with one another. We have seen how the progressive tenses show ongoing action. We have also seen how the perfect tenses indicate two events and their relationship in time. Therefore, when a tense is both progressive and perfect, we should expect that one event is ongoing, and occurs continuously until a second event occurs. In the case of the present perfect progressive, the "second event" is assumed to be the present moment. The perfect progressive tenses use the word string "form of HAVE + form of BE + present participle."

- 4.1 Jenny has been reading for three hours. (Present perfect progressive; the action has occurred continuously up to the present moment.)
- 4.2 It has been snowing all week. (Present perfect progressive; the action started a week ago and is still happening.)
- 4.3 The detective had been looking for the woman for three years before he found her. (Past perfect progressive; the detective kept looking until he found her.)
- 4.4 My grandfather had been sleeping until the alarm went off. (Past perfect progressive; the grandfather slept continuously until the time of the alarm.)
- 4.5 James will have been cleaning for two hours by the time the guests arrive. (Future perfect progressive; "will" indicates the future; the cleaning continues until the people get there.)
- 4.6 When our bus driver retires next month, he will have been driving for thirty years. (Future perfect progressive; "will" indicates the future; the driving continues until the retirement.)