

Distinguishing Simple Past, Present Perfect, & Past Perfect

In English, there are generally three ways to describe an action in the past.

The Simple Past

1. Describes actions of short duration in the past.

*Ex: I **met** Dr. Dance yesterday, and we **talked** for a few minutes.*

2. Describes actions that took place over a period of time in the past.

*Ex: Dr. Dance **taught** at Cuyamaca College for ten years.*

3. Describes past habitual actions.

*Ex: When Dr. Dance was at school, he **rode** his bike to class.*

The Present Perfect

1. Expresses an action or an emotion that started in the past and has continued into the present.

*Ex: Dr. Jones **has lived** in San Diego for many years. (still lives there)*

2. Indicates an action that happened at an indefinite time in the past. The time of the action is not given. When the time is given, the Simple Past is used.

*Ex: Ana **has finished** her composition. She **finished** it two days ago.*

The **Past Perfect** is used to refer to an action in the past that happened before another action in the past.

*Ex: When I **got** home, my roommate **had** already **cleaned** the apartment.*

(simple past action #2)

(past perfect action #1)

Note: The Past Perfect usually occurs with the Simple Past, but the Past Perfect can be the only tense in a sentence if a specific past time is given.

*Ex: By three o'clock, Professor Larson's lecture **had ended**.*

When revising your writing, be careful to check your verbs for correct time reference. Sometimes students (of ESL, in particular) will use the simple present (*I am, she works*) or the simple past (*he went, we talked*) for all past tense actions. The rules above should help you understand how the Present Perfect and Past Perfect can be used to better clarify time relationships in your sentences.

For example, the sentence

I study English since I arrive in the U.S. last year.

would be better if the verb “study” were employed in the Present Perfect (“have studied”) and the verb “arrive” in the Simple Past (“arrived”):

*I **have studied** English since I **arrived** in the U.S. last year.*

Also, in the sentence

John entered the theater after the movie started.

the relationship between these two past actions (“entered” and “started”) would be more clearly understood if “started” were employed in the Past Perfect (“had started”):

*John entered the theater after the movie **had started**.*

The following exercise will help you learn to use these three past tense verb forms in your own writing.

Exercise: Revise the following sentences using Past Perfect and Present Perfect to clarify time relationships. (Some of the verbs are correct as they appear.)

1. I wanted to get some extra help, so I went to the Writing Center with the paper I wrote.
2. Since I have been in California, I see several beautiful sunsets.
3. By ten o'clock, the lecture began.
4. Joan wanted to see the concert, but since it already started, she decided to go to a movie instead.
5. I studied at San Diego State since 1995.
6. Mark and Nancy are married since fall of 1990.
7. The game begins by the time we got there, so we went home and watched it on TV.
8. Tom started at IBM ten years ago. He was happy ever since.
9. I never heard him speak before last week.
10. The teacher told us that the papers we submitted were the best she ever read.
11. Susan works here for seven years; she started in 1990.
12. Did the teacher grade the essays yet?
13. I never saw such a good movie.
14. The company president made it clear that all the work we did would be rewarded.
15. My English improves since I started using the tutoring center.