

# Grammar: Verb Tenses

## What is Tense?

“*tense* (noun): distinction of form in a verb to express distinctions of time or duration of the action or state it denotes.”<sup>1</sup> A verb tense is a form of a verb used to indicate the time or the continuation or completeness of an action in relation to the time of speaking.

Tense is a method that we use in the English language to refer to time: past, present and future. Some languages other than English have no tenses but have alternative ways to refer to time.

## The three (3) “times” that can be indicated by verb tenses in English

- **Present:** this is the “default” time and refers to an event which is occurring now (“non-past”).
- **Past:** refers to events that occurred earlier on.
- **Future:** refers to upcoming events (yet to come)

## The four (4) "aspects" that can be expressed in English

- **Simple:** This is the "default" aspect and it refers to the time of focus.
- **Perfect:** Refers to the completion of an event, before the time of focus.
- **Progressive (or Continuous):** Refers to the duration of an event which is in progress at the time of focus.
- **Perfect Progressive (or Perfect Continuous):** Refers to the duration of an event which happened in the past.

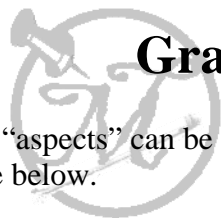
*Aspect* refers to the duration or type of activity.

## The Timeline

PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE
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<sup>1</sup> Webster’s Dictionary. Tense (on-line). [www.webster.com](http://www.webster.com). May 2007.



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The 3 “times” and 4 “aspects” can be combined to express 12 "verb tenses". These verb tenses are indicated in the table below.

	Simple	Perfect	Progressive (or continuous)	Perfect Progressive (or continuous)
Present	<b>Present Simple:</b> The action takes place now, the action is something that happens regularly, or you are describing something that is generally true.	<b>Present Perfect:</b> Used to talk about experiences from the past without stating when you did it, only if you did it (1). Also used to talk about a change or to give new information (2). It is also used to talk about a continuing situation (3).	<b>Present Continuous:</b> Not a single action, it's an action that carries on. It is good for describing what people are doing at a particular moment.	<b>Present Perfect Continuous:</b> Used to talk about an action that started in the past and stopped recently. There is usually an effect now because of it (1). Also used to talk about an action that started in the past and is continuing now. This is often used with <u>for</u> or <u>since</u> (2).
	I live in Montreal. I want you to help me now. I walk the dog everyday. She always tries hard. Do you play hockey? Train travel is expensive.	1) <u>He has</u> eaten. 1) <u>He has</u> lived in Quebec City. 1) <u>We have</u> never eaten lobster. 2) <u>I have</u> purchased a new car. 2) <u>Laura has</u> sprained her ankle. 3) <u>I have</u> worked there since May. 3) <u>Jim has</u> been sick for two days.	I <u>am</u> working late. I <u>am</u> kicking the soccer ball. I <u>am</u> working hard. He <u>is</u> eating. She <u>is</u> working hard.	1) I am drowsy because I <u>have been</u> reading. 1) You don't understand because you <u>haven't been</u> paying attention. 2) I <u>have been</u> reading for 3 hours. 2) The class <u>has been</u> studying since lunch.
Past	<b>Simple Past:</b> Used when you are talking about an action that took place at a specific point in the past and is now finished.	<b>Past Perfect:</b> Used to express an action in the past before another action in the past. This is the past in the past.	<b>Past Continuous:</b> Used when you want to talk about a long action that carried on in the past. It is often used to describe what people were doing when something else happened.	<b>Past Perfect Continuous:</b> This tense is similar to the <i>past perfect tense</i> , but it expresses longer actions in the past before another action in the past.
	I ate yesterday. I walked the dog yesterday. He ate yesterday. He went outside yesterday. He walked the dog yesterday.	He <u>had</u> eaten. The train left at 9am. We arrived at 9.15am. When we arrived, the train <u>had</u> left. I wasn't hungry. I <u>had</u> just eaten. I didn't know who he was. I <u>had</u> never seen him before.	I was singing when Tim saw me. He was walking when I saw Jim. They were working when it broke.	Jim started waiting at 7am. I arrived at noon and when I arrived, <u>Jim had been</u> waiting for two hours. <u>Had</u> the pilot <u>been</u> drinking before the crash? Jim was very sleepy. He <u>had been</u> reading all evening.
Future	<b>Simple Future:</b> Often used to make a prediction about the future (1). This tense is also used when there is no plan or decision to do something before we speak (2). Also, we use this tense when we have a firm plan or decision before speaking (3).	<b>Future Perfect:</b> Talks about the past in the future. Expresses action in the future before another action in the future. This is the past in the future.	<b>Future Continuous:</b> Expresses an action at a particular moment in the future. The action will start before that moment but it will not have finished at that moment.	<b>Future Perfect Continuous:</b> Used to talk about a long action before some point in the future.
	1) It <u>will</u> snow tomorrow. 2) We <u>will</u> see what we can do to help you. 2) I <u>will</u> get a piece of paper. 3) He <u>will</u> eat. 3) I <u>will be</u> there tomorrow.	He will have eaten. The train will leave the station at 9am. You will arrive at the station at 9.15am. When you arrive, the train <u>will have</u> left. They will be <u>tired</u> when they arrive since they <u>will not have</u> slept for a long time.	At 4pm Friday, I <u>will be</u> working. I <u>will be</u> playing soccer at 10am tomorrow. Wear your raincoat. It <u>will be</u> raining when you return.	I <u>will</u> have been working here for ten years next week. He <u>will</u> be tired when he arrives. <u>He will</u> have been travelling for 24 hours.