

Basic Verb Tenses

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about different verb tenses, as well as the process of selecting the correct tense in a sentence. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Present, Past, and Future Tenses

2. Different Types of Past Tense

2a. Past Participle

2b. Past Perfect

2c. Irregular Verbs

3. Using Verb Tense in Sentences

1. Present, Past, and Future Tenses

Recall that a verb is the part of speech that shows an action or describes a state of being. Depending on whether you're describing an action that is taking place in the present, future, or past, that verb is going to change to match the tense.

➞ **EXAMPLE** "She walks" is happening now. That means it's a present tense verb, indicating that something is happening in the present.

Do you notice anything special about **present tense**? "She walks" could describe what this person is doing in the immediate present or something that she is always going to be doing. Present tense verbs work this way.

If you're talking about the future, then you'd say "she will walk" because **future tense** verbs indicate that an action will happen sometime in the future.

If you're describing the past, you'd say "she walked" since **past tense** verbs indicate that something happened already, in the past, and is not happening anymore.



TERMS TO KNOW

Present Tense

A verb tense indicating that something is happening in the present.

Future Tense

A verb tense indicating that something will happen in the future.

Past Tense

A verb tense indicating that something happened in the past and is no longer happening.

2. Different Types of Past Tense

There is more than one way to describe what happened in the past, and thus, there are actually several past tenses. The one you'll see and use most commonly is the simple past tense ("she walked").

You can usually spot simple past tense verbs because they end with "d" or "ed," like "walked" and "held." These simple verb tenses are the ones you want to use whenever possible.

Tense is also an important element of meaning in a sentence, and you have to be careful with it.

➞ EXAMPLE "He cooks" is present tense and "he cooked" is simple past tense. Notice that not only has the tense changed, but the implication of the sentence may have changed as well. Instead of knowing that this man is a person who often cooks, the past tense sentence just tells you that he cooked at one point in the past.

2a. Past Participle

Past tense, in fact, can change a lot about the meaning of a sentence, especially when you use a **past participle**. A past participle is a verb form composed of the past tense of the verb plus "have," "has," or "had."

➞ EXAMPLE Here, you have a sentence in simple past tense: *I danced at home*. If you change the verb to a past participle, it becomes: *I have danced at home*. The past tense verb "danced" is now accompanied by the word "have." That pair is your past participle, a special form of the verb.

The past participle can be used in three different ways.

1. It can be used to speak about the past: *I have danced at home*.
2. It can be used to modify a noun by performing like an adjective: *Bruised knees*.
3. It can form the past perfect tense, which you'll now learn about in more detail.



TERM TO KNOW

Past Participle

A verb form composed of the past tense of a verb plus "have," "has," or "had."

2b. Past Perfect

The **past perfect tense** is a type of past tense describing something that took place in the more distant past instead of the recent past by pairing "had" with a verb.

➞ EXAMPLE *I danced at home before it was time for dinner* can become *I had danced at home before it was time for dinner.*

In the second sentence, the dancing and the dinner are clearly separated. In the first sentence, written in the simple past tense, the time period isn't so distinct.

This is why past perfect can be useful— it prevents confusion. Just look at how easy it is to get confused about when things happened.

➞ EXAMPLE *I printed the paper and then the printer broke* can become *I had printed the paper and then the printer broke.*

Using the past perfect tells you that the printing took place further back in time, before the time when the printer broke.



TERM TO KNOW

Past Perfect Tense

A type of past tense describing something that took place in the more distant past rather than the recent past; formed by pairing "had" with a verb.

2c. Irregular Verbs

There are some verbs that don't follow the rules for past tense. These are called **irregular verbs** because instead of using "ed" to show the past tense, they transform entirely.

➞ EXAMPLE If you want to talk about your trip to the lake, you'd write, "I swam in the lake last year" since "swimm~~ed~~" doesn't sound right. Or if you were talking about a time you tripped down the stairs, you wouldn't say, "I fall~~ed~~." Instead, you'd say, "I fell down the stairs."

English is full of these verbs, so it's important to recognize them, and if you're ever unsure, to check a dictionary.

Here are a few common ones:

- Is/was
- Sing/sang
- Are/were
- Drink/drank



TERM TO KNOW

Irregular Verb

A verb that does not follow the standard pattern for verb formation.

3. Using Verb Tense in Sentences

In any sentence, it's important that all the verbs use the same tense to clearly mark the time frame.

➞ EXAMPLE *I rode my bike and stopped for a drink at the fountain.*

Notice that in the sentence above, "rode" and "stopped" are both past tense.

➞ EXAMPLE *I ride my bike and stopped for a drink at the fountain.*

In this sentence, "ride" is in the present tense, but "stopped" is in the past tense. This doesn't make any sense.

This is a pretty common mistake to make in the tense of a sentence—beginning with a verb in one tense, but shifting into another tense for the next verb. The way a reader understands this sentence is altered when the tenses shift, so you want to be careful to avoid this error.

To write sentences that don't confuse your readers, ask yourself when an action took place:

- If the action is happening now, use the present.
- If it will be happening later, use the future.
- If it already happened, use the simple past.
- If it happened in the past but there are also other events, use the past perfect to describe the oldest event.



TRY IT

Here are two different sentences, each missing a verb. Read them and look for context clues that will help you find the proper verb and its tense.

The dog at the cat all day yesterday.

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In this sentence, the verb is "barked," and it's in the simple past tense. What context clues demonstrate this? You know that this event happened yesterday, and you don't have any reason to add further complexity to the timeline.

If I'm late, all my friends at the restaurant before me.

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In this sentence, the verb phrase that's missing is "will eat." Even though you don't have a noun telling you exactly when this meal will happen, you know that the friends will eat before the speaker, so this has not happened yet. Therefore, you must be using the future tense.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **present, past, and future tenses** of verbs. There are **different types of past tense**, including the **past participle** form and **past perfect tense**. It's important to remember that there are various **irregular verbs** that don't follow the same conjugation rules in the past tense. You also practiced **using verb tense effectively in sentences** by avoiding shifts in tenses.

Best of luck in your learning!



TERMS TO KNOW

Future Tense

A verb tense indicating that something will happen in the future.

Irregular Verb

A verb that does not follow the standard pattern for verb formation.

Past Participle

A verb form composed of the past tense of a verb plus “have,” “has,” or “had.”

Past Perfect Tense

A type of past tense describing something that took place in the more distant past rather than the recent past; formed by pairing “had” with a verb.

Past Tense

A verb tense indicating that something happened in the past and is no longer happening.

Present Tense

A verb tense indicating that something is happening in the present.