

ENGLISH TENSES – OVERVIEW

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While discussing English tenses, as well as those in any other language, it is extremely important to explain the relations between TIME and TENSE, as well as to emphasize the crucial difference between the two concepts: the one of *time* (*extra linguistic*), and the strictly linguistic one – the concept of *tense*.

Time, being an extra linguistic concept, and existing independently in the universe, encompasses three, more or less distinct, segments or categories: *past*, *present* and *future*. On the other hand, the tenses are considered to be a strictly linguistic concept, i.e. verb forms used to express actions, events, or states occurring in time.

This becomes particularly important in view of the fact that in English, as indeed is the case with some other languages, there is no strict or unambiguous correspondence between time and tense: a present tense may be used to express actions happening in the future and past time.

The Simple Present Tense

Form:

The Simple Present Tense, as its name clearly implies, is formed of only one element, i.e. of the base form of the verb, with the addition of the ending *-s* or inflectional suffix (following a vowel) or *-es* (following a consonant) in the third person singular.

In order to express the negative form, a special auxiliary verb *do* is used: *does not / doesn't* for third person singular and *do not / don't* for the remaining persons, either singular or plural.

As far as the interrogative form is concerned, the same verb forms of *do* are used (i.e. the auxiliary verb *do* functioning as the operator), following the word order of *to do + subject + main verb* (inversion of the verb).

Use:

The most common use of the tense is to express the present state of affairs or a general fact.

present state: *He **likes** sailing.*

general fact: *The water **boils** at 100 degrees Celsius.*

*Zagreb **lies** on the River Sava.*

Another typical usage of the Present Simple concerns routines and habits, things that occur repeatedly. Time expressions used relating to this particular usage are *often, seldom, always, usually, frequently, sometimes, every day/week/month/year; ever (never)*, etc., sometimes also referred to as *adverbs of frequency*:

*He always **drives** to work.*

The Present Progressive / Continuous Tense**Form:**

The Present Continuous (or Progressive) relates to the imperfective aspect and is complex in its essence, i.e. formed of two elements: the present tense of the verb *to be* + *-ing* form (the present participle of the main verb).

Use:

The main uses relate to the present action that is in progress in the immediate present, the so-called instantaneous present. Typical time expressions are thus: *now, at the moment, still, just*, etc:

*The train **is leaving** the Victoria Station now.*

The action does not need to be in progress at the exact moment of speaking: it can be occurring “around now”, i.e. it could have begun but is not completed yet:

*I **am reading** an interesting story at the moment.* (i.e. I was reading it yesterday, I have not finished yet, and I will continue reading it later).

Permanent vs. temporary

The main contrast between the two tenses discussed above concerns the difference between permanent routines (Present Simple) and temporary routines (Present Continuous):

*He **travels** to work by car (permanent), but his car has broken down, so he is **travelling** to work by train this week. (temporary)*

Expressing annoyance

The Present Progressive can be used in order to express annoyance or irritation on the part of the speaker concerning someone's behaviour. The time expression *always* is typically added:

*He **is always arriving** late.*

Future time

Both Present Simple and Progressive can refer to the future time. The Present Simple verb form can thus express an action that has been arranged and is due to happen because of the fixed schedule or timetable:

*The train **leaves** for London at 11 o'clock this evening.*

Meanwhile, the Present Progressive expresses an action that will occur because of the arrangements among people, i.e. expresses personal plans:

*Ann **is eating** at the restaurant with her husband this evening. (They have previously arranged to do so.)*

Historical present

Although past actions are usually narrated using the past verb forms, present tenses (both simple and progressive) are sometimes used in order to make the action or the story plot more immediate and more vivid to the listener or reader:

*Macbeth **murders** the King of Scotland, who **is staying** at his castle.*

Instantaneous present

Present Simple Tense typically occurs in the sports commentaries in order to express action as it actually happens:

*Hacker **passes** the ball to Short, but Burley **wins** it back for United.*

The Past Simple Tense

Form:

The tense is formed by either adding the *-d* or *-ed* to the base form if the verb is regular, or using the special forms if it is irregular (e.g. write-*wrote*, see-*saw*, take-*took*, hurt-*hurt*). It may be noted that, with the Simple Present Tense, it is the only simple tense in English, all the other tenses representing complex verb phrases formed, apart from the main verb, by means of primary and/or modal auxiliaries.

Negative is formed by means of the irregular past form of the auxiliary verb *to do* (*did not* or *didn't*), regardless of the person or number, while the past form changes into the base form of the main verb:

I *saw* her at the party but I ***didn't*** *spea*k to her.

Interrogative is formed by using the past tense of the auxiliary verb *to do* as the operator (always preceding the subject), and the word order is as follows:

did + *subject* + *the base verb form*, i.e. without the past ending.

Did you ***spea***k to her at the party last night?

Use:

The basic use of the Past Simple involves the action started and completed in the past, i.e. definite past actions.

The typical time expressions *yesterday*; *last week/ month/year* or *in the particular year* indeed specify the time and indicate the completeness of the action expressed:

I bought this interesting CD *yesterday*.

The earthquake ***happened*** in the 1905.

The Past Simple may be used to refer to states existing in the past, in which case stative verb forms are used:

The Romans ***had*** a huge Empire.

She ***was*** a beautiful girl indeed.

The tense is typically used in retelling stories, i.e. in narrating past events:

Once upon a time a Princess ***went*** into a wood and ***sat*** down by a stream.

It is important to emphasize that, unlike Croatian that uses imperfective verb forms for past habits, English uses Past Simple verb forms instead:

He often ***went*** to rock concerts..

vs.

Često ***je odlazio*** na rock koncerte. .

Sequence of tenses / Reported speech

Another important use of the Past Simple and Progressive verb forms occurs in the dependent clause of reported speech, providing that the so-called introductory or reporting verb is in a past tense (Past Simple, Continuous, or Past Perfect). In the described situation it expresses simultaneousness in the past:

Peter told me what the matter ***was***.

*He told me he **was leaving**.*

2nd type conditional clause

The Past Simple verb forms regularly appear in the dependent or so-called *if- clause* of the 2nd type conditional sentences, where it actually represents an unreal condition in the present, functioning as the present subjunctive:

*If I **were** you, I would ask him what the matter is.*
*If I **had** lots of money, I would travel round the world.*
*I would tell you the answer if I **knew** what it was.*

Unreal wish for the present

Past Simple verb forms occur in the sentences beginning with *If only, I wish*, etc., representing present wishes not likely to be fulfilled. The forms are also called subjunctive verb forms:

*If only I **saw** her now!*
*I wish you **weren't** so rude.*

Other conjunctions that require such a subjunctive form are *as if, as though, suppose..., etc.:*

*She looks as if she **were** excited.*

In all of the above examples, the past verb forms somehow signify distance from the speaker's reality.

The Present Perfect Simple Tense

Form:

The tense is formed using two elements: the present form of the auxiliary *to have* (*have* or *has* for the third person singular) and the past participle form of the main verb. The verb can be either regular, thus having its past participle and past tense forms identical, or irregular, its past participle form being unique.

The interrogative form is obtained by the inversion of the two elements, inserting the subject in the middle. The important thing to notice is that the verb remains in its participle form, unlike the Past Simple Tense where the base form of the verb is used.

In order to form the negative, the negative form of the auxiliary is to be used: either *have not / haven't* or *has not / hasn't* (third person singular).

