



I'm Tense, You're Tense, We're All Tense Because of Tenses

The man walks to the house. The dog beside him trotted, its tongue hanging out. The house stood silently as it had for over a hundred years. The dog runs to the front door, his tail a fan in the hot air.

The preceding paragraph makes me tense because of the switching of verb tense from present to past to present. In our craft discussion, we will attempt to relieve the tension by identifying the use and abuse of verb tenses.

As writers, we usually use present tense or past tense for the majority of the exposition or narrative. Not being consistent with verb tenses causes problems. Our main topic of discussion will be present and past tenses, with just a little information about the others.

Verbs change form to show time. Verb tense tells you when the action happens. There are three main verb tenses: present, past, and future. Each main tense is divided into simple, progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive tenses.

	Present	Past	Future
Simple	finish	finished	will finish
Progressive	am/is/are finishing	was/were finishing	will be finishing
Perfect	have/has finished	had finished	will have finished
Perfect Progressive	have/has been finishing	had been finishing	will have been finishing

The **simple** form uses the original verb form for present tense and for regular verbs, adds –ed for past tense and precedes the verb with will (or shall) for future tense.

The **progressive** form is a verb **tense** used to show an ongoing action in progress at some point in time. **Progressive** tense uses a form of “to be” + the present participle (an –ing) verb.

The **perfect** form is the verb tense used to indicate a completed, or “perfected,” action or condition. **Perfect** tense uses a form of “have” or “had” + the past participle. (It is the form of the helping verb that indicates the tense.)

The **perfect progressive** form combines the perfect and progressive form; see the above chart. Again, the form of the helping verbs indicates the tense.

Although quotes in dialogue are always written in present tense, present tense is difficult to use effectively elsewhere in storytelling. Everything has to be happening in the present, not in the past. Many writers who start using present tense slide into past tense and then perhaps back to present, as in the illustration above. Readers often don't feel

comfortable reading something written in present tense. When a reader becomes uncomfortable, the author has lost his audience.

Simple Present

The **simple present** is a verb tense with two main uses. We use the simple present tense when an action is happening right now, or when it happens regularly. Depending on the person, the simple present tense is formed by using the root form or by adding -s or -es to the end.

I feel great! Betty Sue loves pie. I'm sorry to hear that you're sick.

The other is to talk about habitual actions or occurrences.

Betty Sue practices the piano every day. Ms. Jones travels during the summer. Hamsters run all night.

Typically, when we want to describe a temporary action that is currently in progress, we use the present progressive:

Betty Sue can't come to the phone right now because she is brushing her teeth.

How to Form the Simple Present

In the simple present, most regular verbs use the root form, except in the third-person singular (which ends in -s).

Simple Past

The **simple past tense** is a verb tense that is used to talk about things that happened or existed before now. Imagine someone asks what your brother Bruce did while he was in town last weekend.

Bruce entered a hula hoop contest.

He won the silver medal.

The simple past tense shows that you are talking about something that has already happened. Unlike the past progressive tense, which is used to talk about past events that happened over a period of time, the simple past tense emphasizes that the action is finished.

Bruce admired the way the light glinted off his silver medal.

You can also use the simple past to talk about a past state of being, such as the way someone felt about something. This is often expressed with the simple past tense of the verb to be and an adjective, noun, or prepositional phrase.

Bruce was proud of his hula hoop victory.

The contest was the highlight of his week.

How to Formulate the Simple Past

For regular verbs, add -ed to the root form of the verb (or just -d if the root form already ends in an e):

Play→ Played Type→ Typed Listen→ Listened Push→ Pushed

For irregular verbs, things get more complicated. The simple past tense of some irregular verbs looks exactly like the root form:

Put→ Put Cut→ Cut Set→ Set Cost→ Cost Hit→ Hit

For other irregular verbs, including the verb to be, the simple past forms are more erratic:

See→ Saw Build→ Built Go→ Went Do→ Did Rise→ Rose Am/Is/Are→
Was/Were

The good news is that verbs in the simple past tense (except for the verb to be) don't need to agree in number with their subjects.

Bruce **polished** his medal. The other winners **polished** their medals too.

Past Perfect

The **past perfect**, also called the pluperfect, is a verb tense used to talk about actions that were completed before some point in the past.

We were shocked to discover that someone **had graffitied** "Killroy was here" on our front door. We were relieved that Killroy **had used** washable paint.

The past perfect tense is for talking about something that happened before something else. Imagine waking up one morning and stepping outside to grab the newspaper. On your way back in, you notice a mysterious message scrawled across your front door: Killroy was here. When you're telling this story to your friends later, how would you describe this moment? You might say something like:

I turned back to the house and saw that someone named Killroy had defaced my front door!

In addition to feeling indignant on your behalf, your friends will also be able to understand that Killroy graffitied the door at some point in the past before the moment this morning when you saw his handiwork, because you used the past perfect tense to describe the misdeed.

The formula for the past perfect tense is had + [past participle]. It doesn't matter if the subject is singular or plural; the formula doesn't change.

When to Use the Past Perfect

So what's the difference between past perfect and simple past? When you're talking about some point in the past and want to reference an event that happened even earlier, using the past perfect allows you to convey the sequence of the events. It's also clearer and more specific. Consider the difference between these two sentences:

We were relieved that Killroy used washable paint. We were relieved that Killroy had used washable paint.

It's a subtle difference, but the first sentence doesn't tie Killroy's act of using washable paint to any particular moment in time; readers might interpret it as "We were relieved that Killroy was in the habit of using washable paint." In the second sentence, the past perfect makes it clear that you're talking about a specific instance of using washable paint.

Another time to use the past perfect is when you are expressing a condition and a result:

If I had woken up earlier this morning, I would have caught Killroy red-handed.

The past perfect is used in the part of the sentence that explains the condition (the if-clause).

Most often, the reason to write a verb in the past perfect tense is to show that it happened before other actions in the same sentence that are described by verbs in the simple past tense. Writing an entire paragraph with every verb in the past perfect tense is unusual (and distracting).

When Not to Use the Past Perfect

Don't use the past perfect when you're not trying to convey some sequence of events. If your friends asked what you did after you discovered the graffiti, they would be confused if you said:

I had cleaned it off the door.

They'd likely be wondering what happened next because using the past perfect implies that your action of cleaning the door occurred before something else happened, but you don't say what that something else is. The "something else" doesn't always have to be explicitly mentioned, but context needs to make it clear. In this case there's no context, so the past perfect doesn't make sense.

Present Perfect

The **present perfect tense** refers to an action or state that either occurred at an indefinite time in the past (e.g., we have talked before) or began in the past and continued to the present time (e.g., he has grown impatient over the last hour). This tense is formed by have/has + the past participle.

The construction of this verb tense is straightforward. The first element is *have* or *has*, depending on the subject the verb is conjugated with. The second element is the past participle of the verb, which is usually formed by adding -ed or -d to the verb's root (e.g., walked, cleaned, typed, perambulated, jumped, laughed, sautéed) although English does have quite a few (about 250) verbs that have irregular past participles (e.g., done, said, gone, known, won, thought, felt, eaten).

These examples show how the present perfect can describe something that occurred or was the state of things at an unspecified time in the past.

I have walked on this path before.

We have eaten the lasagna here.

The important thing to remember about the present perfect is that you can't use it when you are being specific about when it happened.

I have put away all the laundry.

I have put away all the laundry this morning.

You can use the present perfect to talk about the duration of something that started in the past is still happening.

She has had the chickenpox since Tuesday

Examples All Twelve Tenses

Simple Tenses

Present Simple

"I play golf."

Past Simple

"I played golf."

Future Simple

"I will play golf."

Perfect Tenses

Present Perfect

"I have played golf."

Past Perfect

"I had played golf."

Future Perfect

"I will have played golf."

Continuous Tenses

Present Continuous

"I am playing golf."

Past Continuous

"I was playing golf."

Future Continuous

"I will be playing golf."

Present Perfect Continuous

"I have been playing golf."

Past Perfect Continuous

"I had been playing golf."

Future Perfect Continuous

"I will have been playing golf."