

# THE TENSES OF ENGLISH



Some grammar books make a distinction between tense and aspect. In this view there are two tenses – past and present - and two aspects: the continuous/progressive aspect [represented by the present participle: e.g. *walking*] and the perfect aspect [represented by the past participle: e.g. *gone*]. Most coursebooks do not make such a distinction and present the various combinations of tense and aspects as separate 'tenses'. This means there are at least 12 active tenses, maybe more depending on what you include.

Below are the *active tenses* presented in most coursebooks.

- Simple Present Tense
- Present Continuous Tense
- Present Perfect Tense
- Present Perfect Continuous Tense
- Simple Past Tense
- Past Continuous Tense
- Past Perfect Tense
- Past Perfect Continuous Tense
- Simple Future Tense
- Future Continuous Tense
- Future Perfect Tense
- Future Perfect Continuous Tense

## The Present

### Present Simple

The present simple is used:

to talk about repeated events like habits:

He smokes 20 cigarettes a day.

to talk about a fact which is always true:

The earth goes around the sun.

to talk about states:

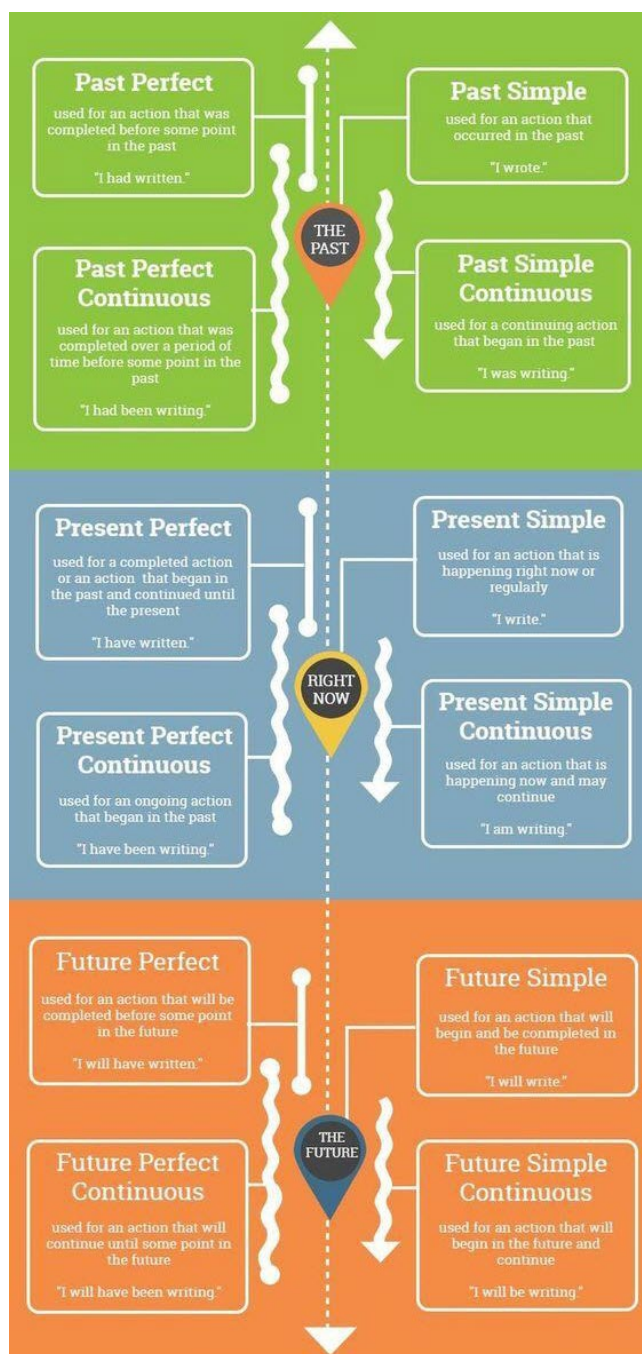
I work here.

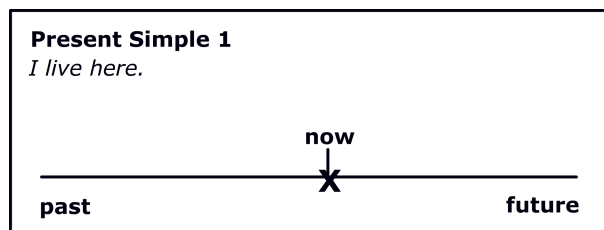
to tell jokes [*the historical present*]:

A man walks into a bar. . . .

to talk about future timetabled events:

The train leaves at 5.10.





Timeline: The Present Simple 1



Timeline: The Present Simple 2

### Present Continuous/Progressive

The present continuous/progressive [*be + present participle/-ing*] is used:

to talk about activities happening now:

*I'm watching TV.*

to talk about an activity happening around now but not always exactly now:

*I'm reading a good book at the moment.*

to talk about a temporary activity:

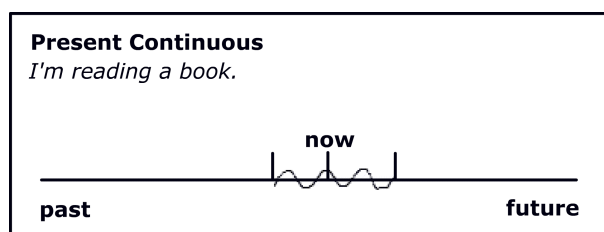
*I'm staying in a hotel while I'm looking for a flat.*

to talk about a future arrangement:

*I'm meeting John at six.*

to talk about an annoying habit:

*She's always biting her nails.*



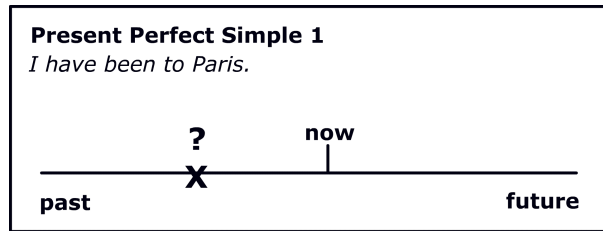
Timeline: The Present Continuous

### Present Perfect Simple

The present perfect simple [*have + past participle/Third Form*] is used:

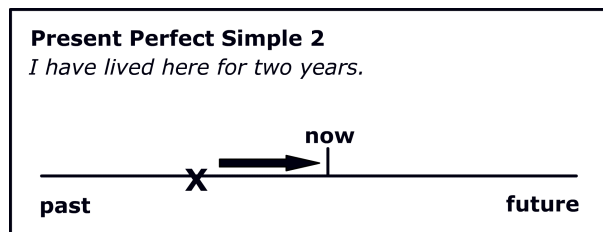
to talk about an event which did or didn't happen in the time period up to now. The exact time of the event is not important:

I've been to Paris.



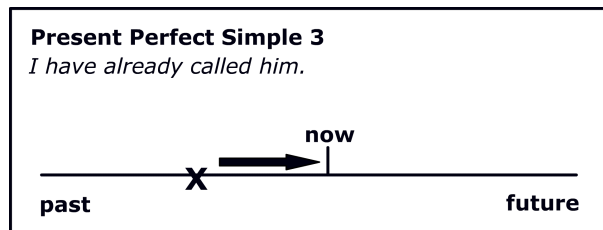
Timeline: The Present Perfect Simple 1

to talk about something that started in the past and continues up to now. For and since are often used:  
I have lived here for five years.



Timeline: The Present Perfect Simple 2

to talk about something which happened in the recent past and has present relevance or importance:  
I've just finished.



Timeline: The Present Perfect Simple 3

### Present Perfect Continuous/ Progressive

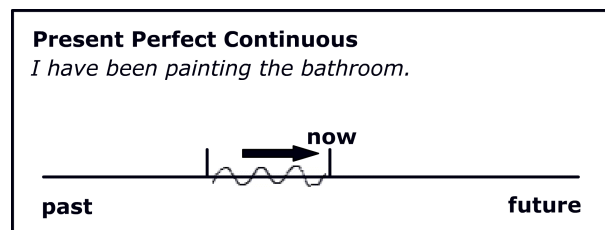
The present perfect continuous/progressive [*have + been + present participle/-ing*] is used:  
to talk about actions or states happening in the period of time up to the present:

I've been living here for three years.

to talk about a past activity [finished or unfinished] with a present result:

I've been painting the bedroom.

The present perfect simple is more focused on the completion of the activity. In contrast the present perfect continuous emphasizes the continuation of the activity.



Timeline: The Present Perfect Continuous

### Be used to

*Be used to* is an expression, not a tense, used to say we are familiar with something e.g. a state or activity.

I'm used to getting up at six.

## The Past

### Past Simple

The past simple is used:

to talk about finished actions in the past:

I left home at 7 this morning.

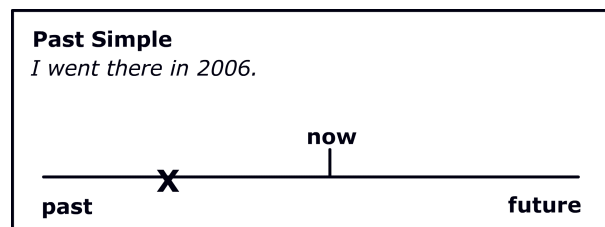
to talk about a set of actions in a story:

He met her in 1960 and they dated for four years before they finally separated.

to talk about past states or habits:

When I was younger I had a pet rabbit.

He walked to work every day for ten years.



Timeline: The Past Simple

### Past Continuous/Progressive

The past continuous [*past be + present participle/-ing*] is used:

to say that something was in progress at a certain time in the past:

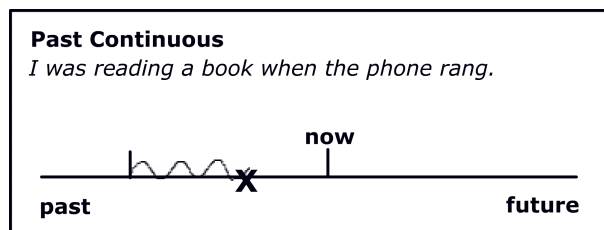
When I was coming to work last week I saw a train crash.

to describe something in the past:

The sun was shining brightly as I reached the beach.

to describe an annoying habit in the past:

He was always asking me silly questions.



Timeline: The Past Continuous

### Future in the past

Future in the past is expressed using *would* or *was/were going to*.

No-one realized he would go on to become president.

I didn't know you were going to the cinema.

### Used to

*Used to* is used to talk about a habit or state which happened in the past but does not happen now:

I used to live in Paris. [But I don't now.]

### Would

*Would* is used like *used to* to talk about past habits but *not* states:

He would go for a walk every morning before breakfast.

### Past Perfect Simple

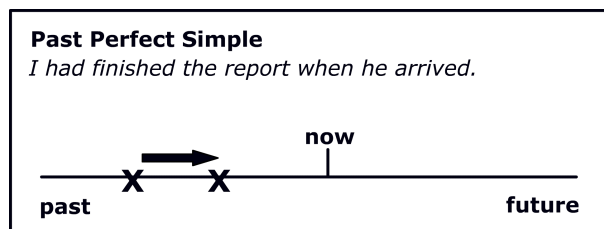
The past perfect simple [*had + past participle/Third Form*] is used to show that an event occurred before another event in the past.

I had met him twice before I managed to interview him.

Sometimes the sequence of events is clear so the past perfect is optional or not necessary.

Before I left I closed all the windows.

When the past perfect is not exactly necessary it might be used for stylistic reasons or to make the sequence absolutely unambiguous.

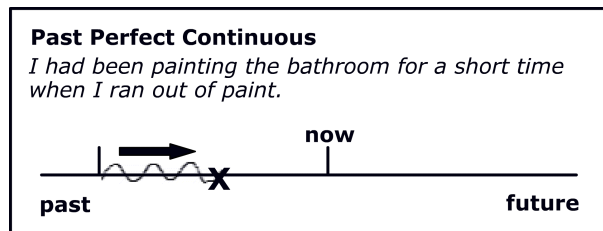


Timeline: The Past Perfect

### Past Perfect Continuous/Progressive

The past perfect continuous [*had + been + present participle/-ing*] is used to talk about an earlier situation or action which continued up to the time event you are focused on in the past:

We'd been partying for ages before the neighbours complained.



Timeline: The Past Perfect Continuous

## The Future

### Future Simple

The future simple [*will + base form/infinite*] is used:

to talk about future facts:

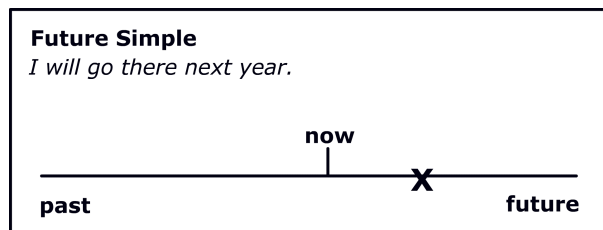
I'll be ten in two weeks.

to talk about predictions:

I'll see you later.

to talk about decisions/offers etc. made at the time of speaking:

I'll get that for you.

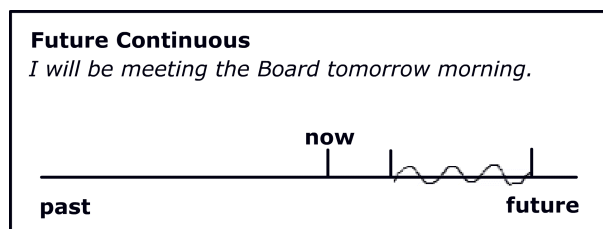


Timeline: The Future Simple

### Future Continuous/Progressive

The future continuous [*will + be + present participle/-ing*] is used to say that something will be in progress at a certain time in the future:

I'll be sitting on the beach drinking rum and coke this time next week.



Timeline: The Future Continuous

## Future Perfect Simple

The future perfect simple [*will + have + past participle/Third Form*] is used to talk about something planned to happen or expected to happen before another action or by a certain time in the future.

By the end of the year, I'll have read all his books.

I'll have finished by the time you are ready.

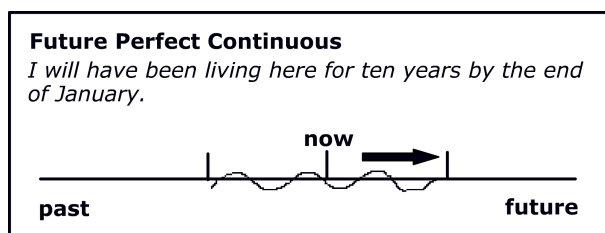


Timeline: The Future Perfect Simple

## Future Perfect Continuous/Progressive

The future perfect continuous/progressive [*will + have + been + present participle/-ing*] is used to talk about something expected or planned to be in progress before another action or by a certain time in the future.

He'll have been working here for five years by the end of the semester.



Timeline: The Future Perfect Continuous

## Going to future

The *going to* future is used to talk about plans which are based on evidence e.g. present facts:

It's going to rain soon. [I can see the clouds]

## Present Simple

The present simple is used to talk about future timetabled events:

The train leaves at 5.10.

## Present Continuous/Progressive

The present continuous [*be + present participle/-ing*] is used to talk about a future arrangement:

I'm meeting John at six.

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