

Past and past perfect

Past simple and past continuous

We use the past simple for completed actions in the past (1) and past states (2).

- 1 Dickens **wrote** *Oliver Twist*. • Edison **invented** the light bulb. • The Beatles **sang** 'Yesterday'.
- 2 Life **seemed** easier then. • That ring **belonged** to my mother. (NOT ~~It was belonging to my mother.~~)

We use the past simple for two or more past actions in sequence, especially in narrative.

- 3 I **tripped** and **landed** on my knees. • He **knocked** her down, **grabbed** her purse and **ran** off. • He **took** off his hat and **came** forward. The floorboards **creaked** under his boots.

To talk about habits in the past or to make a stronger contrast with the present, we can use the form *used to* (4). The negative is *didn't use to* or (more formally) *used not to* (5). We can also use *would* to talk about typical actions or activities during a period in the past (6).

- 4 There **used to be** a shop on the corner. • He **used to smoke** a lot. (NOT ~~He was used to smoke a lot.~~)
- 5 **Didn't** they **use to hang** people? • We **didn't use to have** a car. • They **used not to be** enemies.
- 6 In summer, we **would take** trips to the country. We **would** sometimes **buy** fresh strawberries.

We use the past continuous to describe actions in progress at a specific time in the past.

- 7 What **were** you **doing** at 8.30 last night? ~ I **wasn't doing** anything special. I **was** just reading. • During the 1890s, many people **were leaving** the south and **moving** to the north to look for work.

We can use the past continuous with some verbs (*wonder, hope*) to make a request more polite.

- 8 I **was wondering** when I could talk to you. • We **were hoping** you might have a free moment.

We can use the past simple when we want to describe a past activity as a series of separate actions (9) and the past continuous to describe the past activity as if it was a continuous action (10). In many cases, the past simple and past continuous can be used interchangeably.

- 9 Usually she **went** to the library about once a week and only **studied** occasionally for tests.
- 10 Before the final exam, however, she **was going** to the library and **studying** every single day.

In sentences with *when-* and *while-*clauses, we can use the past continuous to describe an activity in one clause that starts before an action in another clause (11). The activity that starts later may interrupt the first activity (12).

- 11 While he **was driving**, I **fell** asleep. • We **saw** Henry while we **were walking** in the park.
- 12 I **was listening** to the news when she **phoned**. • When I **was running**, I **slipped** and **fell**.

Note the difference between *When she came back, we were watching TV* (= We were watching before she came back) and *When she came back, we watched TV* (= We watched after she came back).

Past perfect and past perfect continuous

We use the past perfect (or pluperfect) when we are describing an action with the past simple and we want to refer to an action further in the past (13). We also use the past perfect for earlier events after clauses with reporting or thinking verbs in the past (14).

- 13 We went to his office, but he **had left**. • Susan **didn't have** the money because she **had spent** it.
- 14 Joe told me our team **had scored** twice. • I thought we **had won**. (NOT ~~I thought we have won.~~)

We use the past perfect continuous for events in progress before another event in the past.

- 15 I **had been thinking** about that before you mentioned it.

State verbs are not used in this way. (NOT ~~I had been knowing about that before you mentioned it.~~)

We can describe an action as a process going on before a past event (past perfect continuous) (16).

We can also describe it as the result of an action before a past event (past perfect) (17).

- 16 We **had been making** chicken soup so the kitchen was still hot and steamy when she came in.
- 17 We **had made** chicken soup and so we offered her some when she came in.

8 Complete each paragraph with one set of verbs, using the past simple or past continuous.

miss / not get / wonder break / see / steal / teach
come / listen / make / say explain / talk / understand

- A We (1) to music when one of the neighbours (2) to the door and (3) she couldn't sleep because we (4) too much noise.
- B Someone (5) into Barbara's office and (6) her computer yesterday afternoon while she (7) her history class. No one (8) the thief.
- C Because he never (9) anything very clearly, none of us (10) what the science teacher (11) about most of the time.
- D I'm sorry. I (12) here on time and I (13) the beginning of your presentation, but I (14) if you might have an extra handout left.

9 Complete this text with these verbs in the past perfect or past perfect continuous.

be catch live plan take
break have make remove worry

The telephone call from the police was a shock, but not a complete surprise. Molly (1) constantly about the old house lying empty during the two months since her mother went into hospital. She (2) to go round and check the empty place, but she (3) extra busy at work recently. According to the police, a homeless man (4) into the house. They (5) him one morning as he was leaving the building with one of her mother's large paintings. When Molly walked into the house, it was obvious that the man (6) there for quite a while. He (7) food from the cupboards and throwing empty tins and packages all over the floor. He (8) quite a mess. He (9) also several paintings from the walls. Molly decided not to tell her mother because she (10) already enough pain in recent weeks and really didn't need any more bad news.

10 Editing. Correct the mistakes in the use of tenses in this text.

A few years ago, when my friend and I were ~~hitchhike~~ ^{hitchhiking} through France, we sometimes stop for the night in a park or a field. If it wasn't rain, we just sleep outside in our sleeping bags under the stars. We really enjoying that. If it was rain, we put up our small tent and crawl inside for the night. One night, while we sleep in the tent, I think that the ground moving under me. I sit up and I realize that the tent was try to move and only the weight of our bodies was hold it in place. When we get outside, we discover that we stand ankle-deep in a small stream and our tent slowly floats away. At first, we really surprised and worried, but then we think it is very funny.

Present perfect or past simple?

We use the present perfect when we think a situation has not ended (1) and the past simple when we think the situation ended (2).

- 1 I **have lived** in London for a year. • She **has known** him since school. • **Has** Jason **been** ill?
- 2 I **lived** in London for a year. • She **knew** him in school. • **Was** Jason ill?

We use the present perfect with time expressions for a period up to now (*lately, so far*) (3). We use the past simple with time expressions for a period that ended earlier (*last night, yesterday*) (4).

- 3 **Have** you **seen** any good films lately? • So far the new teacher **hasn't given** us any homework.
- 4 **Did** you **see** that film last night? • I **didn't do** the homework yesterday.
(NOT ~~Have you seen that film last night?~~ I haven't done the homework yesterday.)

We use the present perfect when we are talking about actions up to the present which might happen again (5) and the past simple for actions which we don't think will happen again (6).

- 5 He **has written** two bestsellers and we hope his next book will do well. • He's **been** on TV; he's famous! • He **has** often **had** health problems.
- 6 She **wrote** several books of poetry in the last years of her life. • She **was** a teacher in Zambia. • She **had** three children.

In clauses beginning with *after, as soon as* and *when*, we can use the present perfect for completed actions in the future (7) and the past simple for completed actions in the past (8).

- 7 *After/As soon as/When* he **has made** his copies, I will do mine. (= He hasn't made his copies yet. Neither have I.)
- 8 *As soon as* he **made** his copies, I did mine. (= He made his copies first, then I made mine.)

11 Complete each paragraph with one set of verbs, using the present perfect or past simple.

have / not come / tell become / have / hear know / meet / start

- A I (1) Laura Palmer since we both (2) work on the same day at Thames College about five years ago. She is one of the smartest people I (3) ever
- B (4) you the good news yet? Jenny and Michael (5) just parents! Jenny (6) a baby girl last night.
- C The plumber (7) me this morning, 'I'll be back to finish the work as soon as I (8) some lunch.' But now it's past three o'clock and he still (9) back.

12 Complete this dialogue with these verbs in the present perfect or past simple.

ask be (x2) have make not call not eat not know not seem say tell

It's Monday afternoon. Ron is at home, phoning Sue at the office where they both work.

Ron: Hi Sue, it's me.

Sue: Well, hello! Where (1) you all day? The boss (2) me this morning where you (3), but he (4) to be looking for you or anything.

Ron: What (5) you?

Sue: I (6) him that I (7) Are you okay?

Ron: I'm sorry I (8) you this morning. I (9) the flu since Saturday. I (10) anything for two days and it (11) me feel really weak. But I'll probably be there tomorrow.

Past perfect or past simple?

When we are talking about actions in the past, with the past simple (*won*), and we want to refer to actions even further in the past, we use the past perfect (*had won*).

- 1 Jenny Fisher **won** her first gold medal in 2004. She **had won** two silver medals in previous Olympics, but this was her first gold.

With the past simple (*arrived*) in a *when*-clause, we use the past perfect (*had started*) in the main clause for an earlier action (2) and the past simple (*started*) for a later action (3).

- 2 When he arrived in the morning, we **had started** work. (= We started work before he arrived)
3 When he arrived in the morning, we **started** work. (= We started work after he arrived)

Note that two verbs in the past simple can suggest a cause and effect: When I **called**, he **came**.

In conditionals, we use the past perfect for something that did not happen (4) and the past simple for something that might happen (5).

- 4 If you **had come**, you could have stayed with us. • If I **had known**, I certainly would have helped.
5 If you **came**, you could stay with us. • If I **saw** anyone doing that, I certainly would try to stop it.

We usually use the past perfect, not the past simple, with some adverbs (*already*, *just*, *still*).

- 6 An ambulance came quickly, but the crash victim **had already died**. (NOT ~~The crash victim already died.~~)
7 The books **still hadn't arrived** when I left. (NOT ~~They still didn't arrive when I left.~~)
8 The students **had just opened** their books when the fire alarm went off.

13 Choose an ending (a–d) for each beginning (1–4) and add these verbs in the past perfect or past simple.

come give need not finish say talk work

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 He the money last week, (...) | a that you about that already. |
| 2 You during the meeting (...) | b so I it to him then. |
| 3 When he back later, (...) | c if she harder. |
| 4 Ashley could have done much better (...) | d they still writing their reports. |

14 Complete this text with these verbs.

was (×2) explained didn't eat have gone had cooked hadn't eaten
were went didn't lock have heard had reached hadn't locked

One of the four-year-olds in the reading group suddenly said, 'This is the silliest story I (1) ever! I (2) in the middle of reading Goldilocks and the Three Bears to the group. We (3) just the part in the story where Goldilocks goes into the bears' house and eats some of the food from bowls on the table.

'Where (4) the bears?' he asked.

'Maybe outside or playing in the woods,' I suggested.

'And their house was wide open? They (5) even the door before going out?'

'Well, in the old days, people (6) their doors.'

'And their food was on the table, but they (7) it before they (8) outside?'

'Maybe they (9) it because it (10) too hot.'

'If you (11) that meal, you wouldn't (12) out and left it, would you?'

'Probably not, but it's just a story,' I (13) rather weakly.