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This textbook is for English learners at Intermediate and Advanced levels, and above. It provides a deep understanding of the English tenses, considering grammar and practical use. It is a guide to all the time-based tenses, including their non-time-based uses, which will help you to use the English tenses in different, and more natural, ways.

The Kindle version of this book has been optimised to get you straight into the topic – you’ll find indexing and a discussion of forms at the back of the book.
INTRODUCTION

This guide will take you through the English tenses from Past, to Present, to Future, with each section covering four main forms (Simple, Continuous, Perfect and Perfect Continuous). There are initial notes on grammatical form, examples for each form to demonstrate use, and detailed explanations for both the rules and the practical uses of the tenses.

These explanations are designed to help you learn the specific English grammar rules for the tenses and to identify common (often more flexible) usage. The complexity of the tenses and their uses often arises from native English speakers’ ability to bend the rules of the language. In many cases the rules give way to general patterns, which can be difficult to master – this book is designed to help.

What are the English Tenses?

Time in the English language is essentially shown using twelve distinct grammatical structures, referred to as the tenses: four for the past, four for the present and four for the future.

These twelve tenses can be used for many different purposes. Because of these different uses, they are often called aspects rather than tenses. For the sake of simplicity, this guide will discuss these different grammatical forms (aspects) as tenses.

The tenses tell us about the specific points in time of actions, events and states. These can be summarised with short grammatical rules, but (as is true with much of the English language) these rules have many exceptions, and do not tell the whole story. This is because English in practical use is always changing, and English is spoken so widely that different uses emerge from different regions. It is also because over time English has evolved to be used in particular ways, with ingrained exceptions to even the most simple rules.

For example, the present simple normally represents a timeless fact, for instance heated water boils, but it can also be used to talk about conditions in the present moment, such as I feel happy now. (A use that is explained in Error! Reference source not found.)

This guide is designed as a complete comparison of the tenses to help explain where these exceptions emerge, why certain tenses can be used in different ways, and how to choose between similar uses.

How to use this book

This guide offers explanations of form, examples of form and explanations of comparative uses for each tense. You can read the sections individually to learn about different aspects of
English, or you can read the book in order, to get an overall understanding of the tenses. The guide is designed to be read in full, but you may choose to use it for reference.

The guide begins with an explanation of the general rules of Form, to show how the different tenses are constructed. Each section then presents the Affirmative (Positive), Question, Negative, and Negative Question forms of a tense, putting the form rules into practice with numerous examples.

Following the form examples, the different uses of each tense are explained, followed by notes on how the uses relate to other tenses. These parts will help you understand the unique functions of the tenses, so you can choose between the tenses in everyday use.

In many cases, this goes beyond the basic single-use rules you may find in other textbooks, to show both the pure grammatical purposes of the tenses and the other ways that native English speakers use them.

There are regular examples and illustrations to aid understanding, with a glossary of grammar terms and additional information in Error! Reference source not found.. The examples used are deliberately varied and often unconventional, so carefully comparing the uses and examples (including those in the form tables) may help test your understanding of the information offered here.

There are no exercises in this book, but you may be interested in pairing this self-study with The English Tenses Exercise Book, which is designed to specifically drill understanding of this guide.

Please note that this guide is written in British English. Although some consideration has been given to the differences between British and American English, it may still contain regionally specific language.

**Colour coding**

For e-readers that support colour, this guide is colour-coded to highlight important grammar points, structure and examples.

- Listed examples are given with bullet points.
- *Italics* show examples within the main body of the text, or additional information in listed examples.
- **Bold black** is used for structure and form.
- **Orange** highlights grammar rules and words of importance.
- **Blue words** are clickable links to useful sections in the guide or online.
THE PAST

Events, actions and states described by the past tenses are usually finished, or were interrupted in the past, and do not directly affect the present moment.

Using the past, you can talk about complete events, events that were completed before other events, and events that were ongoing or interrupted at specific times before now.

- Something happened.
- Something was happening at a certain time in the past.
- Something had happened before another past event.
- Something had been happening before another past event.

These different tenses give you the ability to explain the past in sequences, and help you to relate different past events to each other.
# 1. PAST SIMPLE FORM

## 1.1 Past Simple - Affirmative Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>liked</td>
<td>that class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>helped</td>
<td>me learn a lot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>planned</td>
<td>to visit Croatia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They</td>
<td>dreamed</td>
<td>of a better tomorrow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>whistled</td>
<td>very loudly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She</td>
<td>worked</td>
<td>all night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It</td>
<td>sounded</td>
<td>horrible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>played</td>
<td>football.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 1.2 Past Simple - Question Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Word</th>
<th>did</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Bare Infinitive</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What</td>
<td>did</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>come</td>
<td>here for?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>like</td>
<td>win?</td>
<td>the film?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How</td>
<td>they</td>
<td>know</td>
<td>we would be there?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where</td>
<td>he</td>
<td>go?</td>
<td>that?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why</td>
<td>she</td>
<td>say</td>
<td>at us?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: past simple questions using to be (was, were) do not require to do or a bare infinitive.

- Why was I so tired yesterday?

## 1.3 Past Simple - Negative Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>did</th>
<th>not</th>
<th>Bare Infinitive</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>did</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>learn</td>
<td>enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>did</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>tell</td>
<td>me about the play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>did</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>want</td>
<td>another drink.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They</td>
<td>did</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>know</td>
<td>how to open the door.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>did</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>smell</td>
<td>very nice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She</td>
<td>did</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>give</td>
<td>me her keys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It</td>
<td>did</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>look</td>
<td>fun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>did</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>win</td>
<td>the competition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: past simple negative statements using to be (was, were) do not require to do or a bare infinitive.
- You were not quick enough.
- He was not a member of the club.

1.4 Past Simple - Negative Question Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Word</th>
<th>didn’t</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Bare Infinitive</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What</td>
<td>didn’t</td>
<td>she</td>
<td>not had</td>
<td>take?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why</td>
<td>didn’t</td>
<td>it</td>
<td>not see</td>
<td>rain?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: past simple negative questions using to be (was, were) do not require to do or a bare infinitive.

- Why was I not in the meeting?
- Weren’t you happy about the decision?
2. Past Simple Uses

The main use of the past simple is for completed actions, states or events. It can also be used to emphasise detail or to describe a time.

2.1 Completed actions

The past simple is mostly seen as complete. This means the action or state described has finished, and can no longer change, with no direct effect on the present.

- We walked the dog. (a task that finished, independent of now)

The past simple does not have to refer to an activity, it can also describe a complete or finished feeling.

- I felt sad when my dog died. (at that specific time I felt sad)

The past simple is often indicated by a past time, such as last week, in 1982, or on Monday. It may also be indicated by a time clause, often introduced by when.

- They went home at 9.30pm.
- Last week I learnt about the Great Wall of China.
- It was too bright when they turned on the main lights.

A time clause is a clause (containing at least a subject and a verb) which describes a specific time.

- He was happy when they gave him a piece of cake.

In the above example, the whole clause when they gave him a piece of cake is a time clause, representing a time (the moment that the cake was given to him), signalled by the adverb when. Time clauses are covered in more detail in Error! Reference source not found.

2.2 Emphasising detail

The past simple can be used to emphasise detail. If the past simple is used when another past tense is possible, it stresses that the action was complete.

For example, the present perfect is usually used to discuss visited locations, because experiences in different locations continue to affect us now, and can be added to, such as “I have been to France.”

If you say “I lived in France.” it emphasises that you were there for a fixed, specific period of time.
Similarly, we use the present perfect to say *I have seen this movie*, because the experience affects our current opinion. But *I saw this movie last week* (past simple) emphasises the completion of the action. It stresses *when* you did the action, and that the action was *finished*.

- I have seen this film. (*I now have that experience.*)
- I saw this film last week. (*I completed the action at that past time.*)

You may use the past simple to stress that you completed a recent action. This may demonstrate *insistence*, for example if you want to emphasize who the subject was:

- I have cooked dinner (*now it is ready*).
- I cooked dinner (*not someone else*).

It may also demonstrate *annoyance*:

- I have washed the dishes.
- I washed the dishes again.
2.3 States

All of the simple tenses (in past, present and future) can be used to describe certain states (usually verbs relating to conditions, emotions, senses and possession).

In the past simple, states are completed in the past, and are commonly found with to have (usually showing possession) and to be (usually showing emotions or conditions).

- I had two cars. *(I now have a different number.)*
- He was very sad yesterday. *(We don’t know if he is today.)*
- They didn’t understand why the car would not start. *(At the time, they failed to understand.)*

The past simple does not always tell us the state finished, though – and it may represent an ongoing state, or a state that was interrupted. It simply tells us that the state happened in the past.

- She seemed happy when I saw her.
- The bathroom smelt very strange last time I was there.
- Your hair looked fantastic.

In these cases, the states were ongoing, and may not have ended, but it is important to use the past simple and not the past continuous here.

There are many common state verbs that use the simple tenses; they can be grouped to demonstrate states of mind *(suppose, think, believe, understand, know, want, love, hate, need, like, prefer)*, existence or possession *(be, have, exist, belong, own)* and senses *(feel, smell, seem, taste, appear, look)*. Learn these examples, and be careful to use the simple tenses for them, and it will become clear when similar verbs are appropriate.

Note, that this topic is also covered in Error! Reference source not found., and in Error! Reference source not found., to give further understanding of how specific tenses are used to describe states.
ENJOYED READING?

This sample represents about 10% of The English Tenses Practical Grammar Guide, formatted as a PDF for eReaders. It is also available optimised for particular eReaders, and in paperback format. If you found it useful and would like to read on, get the full book directly from the ELB site HERE.

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