

**THE ENGLISH TENSES**  
**PRACTICAL GRAMMAR GUIDE**

**PHIL WILLIAMS**

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## PREFACE

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.

SAMPLE

# 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.

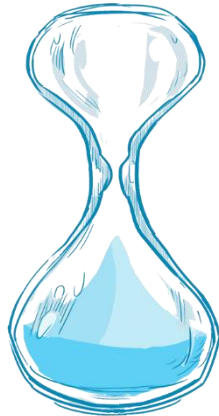
Please note that this guide is written in British English. Although some consideration has been given to the differences between British and American English, it may still contain regionally specific language.

## 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

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

## 1.2 Past Simple - Question Form

Question Word	did	Subject	Bare Infinitive	Additional information
What	did	I	come	here for?
	Did	you	like	the film?
	Did	we	win?	
How	did	they	know	we would be there?
Where	did	he	go?	
Why	did	she	say	that?
	Did	that big dog	bark	at us?

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

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

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

### Past Simple Negative Questions without contractions

Question Word	did	Subject	not	Bare Infinitive	Additional information
	Did	you	not	hear	me shouting?
How	did	we	not	pass	the test?
Why	did	he	not	see	her again?
What	did	she	not	take?	

### Past Simple Negative Questions without contractions

Question Word	didn't	Subject	Bare Infinitive	Additional information
	Didn't	I	buy	the right milk?
What	didn't	they	understand?	
	Didn't	he	pay	the waiter?
Why	didn't	it	rain?	

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*).



*I have cooked dinner. / I cooked dinner.*

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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