

## VERB TENSES

Every verb describes an action or state of being that has a place in time. The action or state of being may be immediate, in the here and now. It may have happened some time ago. Or, it may not have happened yet. We call a verb's placement in time its "tense," and talk of its being in the **past**, **present**, or **future tense**.

### PAST TENSE

In the not too distant past, you **looked** at a sentence that starts several lines above this one. The verb **looked** is in the past tense. The past tense includes any action or state of being that we could find between the dawn of time and a split second before the present.

### PRESENT TENSE

In the present tense, you are reading this very sentence. The verb phrase **are reading** is in the present tense. The present tense includes only those actions or states of being that exist in the immediate moment. Perhaps you are considering a trip to the kitchen, thinking, "I **am** hungry." The verb **am** is in the present tense.

### FUTURE TENSE

In the near future, you **will finish** reading this page. The verb phrase **will finish** is in the future tense. The future tense encompasses all actions or states of being we might encounter from one moment after the present until end of time.

A verb in the future tense is always in the form of a verb phrase, i.e., it is always two or more words. The English language does not have any one-word forms for verbs in the future tense. Instead, we combine one of the auxiliary verbs **shall** or **will** with a principal or main verb to form a verb phrase for the future tense.

Examples:      This caterpillar **will become** a Monarch butterfly.

**I shall return.**

### SIMPLE, PERFECT, AND PROGRESSIVE TENSES

In the discussion of tenses above, we talked about three tenses in their most basic forms, the simple forms. In their simple forms, the three tenses involve actions that merely occur at their respective places in time. Unless otherwise specified, we assume a tense to be simple. When we refer to the **present tense**, we are referring to the **simple present**. When we refer to the **past tense**, we are referring to the **simple past**. And when we refer to the **future tense**, we are referring to the **simple future**.

#### Perfect Tenses

Sometimes, however, it becomes necessary to use the verb to *indicate action that ends*. Here, we need to use the **perfect tenses**. The perfect forms of the past, present, and future tenses have *fixed ending points in time*.

In the perfect form of the past tense, called the **past perfect tense**, the verb expresses an action or condition that *was completed before a certain time in the past*. To form the past perfect tense of a verb, use **had** with the past participle of the main verb (**had** + verb + **-ed**).

Example: I **had smoked** my last cigarette before smoking was banned in public buildings.

Here, the behavior was ended at a point in the past. The verb phrase **had smoked** is in the past perfect tense.

The present tense in its perfect form, called the **present perfect tense**, expresses an action or condition that is completed in the present. To form the present perfect tense of a verb, use **have** or **has** with the past participle of the main verb (**have** or **has** + verb + **-ed**).

Example: I **have smoked** my last cigarette.

The behavior is abandoned now, in the present. The verb phrase **have smoked** is in the present perfect tense.

In the perfect form of the future tense, called the **future perfect tense**, the verb describes action that *will be completed before a certain time in the future*. To form the future perfect tense of a verb, use either **shall** or **will** and **have** with the past participle of the main verb (**shall** or **will** + **have** + verb + **-ed**).

Example: I **will have smoked** my last cigarette before I leave on vacation with Ingrid.

The behavior will be given up in the future at some point before the speaker leaves for his or her vacation. The verb phrase **will have smoked** is in the future perfect tense.

### Progressive Tenses

There is yet another verb tense that includes verbs whose action or condition is specifically *ongoing*, the **progressive tense**. The action or condition of verbs in a progressive tense begins at some point in time— past, present, or future—and *continues*. A progressive tense verb adds a form of the verb **be** to its present participle (**be** + verb + **-ing**). Like the future perfect, the future progressive also uses **shall** or **will** with other pieces of the progressive tense verb.

Past progressive:        I **was thinking** of you while playing our John Legend albums the other day.

Present progressive:    I **am thinking** of you.

Future progressive:    I **will be thinking** of you when I'm in San Francisco next month.

### Perfect Progressive Tenses

Oddly enough, a tense can be both progressive and perfect. It may seem counterintuitive that a verb can involve an ongoing action or condition that has a fixed ending point, but a moment's consideration will reveal this to be true. That some event or feeling is ongoing does not mean that it will never end or has not ended. It simply means that the action or condition persisted for a notable period of time before it ended.

Past perfect progressive:        I **had been thinking** of you until Ray demanded my attention.

Present perfect progressive:    I **have been thinking** of you and wondering whether you're OK.

Future perfect progressive:    I **will have been thinking** of you when the final waltz draws to a close.

The **thinking** in each example began, continued for a time, and then ended. Each verb is in its respective perfect progressive tense.

## VERB TENSES, ILLUSTRATED

	Past	Present	Future
<b>Simple</b>	<p>I <i>ate</i> pizza yesterday. The verb <b>ate</b> indicates an action already completed.</p>	<p>I <i>eat</i> pizza every day. The verb <b>eat</b> indicates an event on a designated date.</p>	<p>I <i>will eat</i> pizza tomorrow. The verb phrase <b>will eat</b> indicates an action that has not happened yet.</p>
<b>Progressive (Continuous)</b>	<p>I <i>was eating</i> pizza when you arrived. The verb phrase <b>was eating</b> indicates an uncompleted action in the past.</p>	<p>I <i>am eating</i> pizza right now. <b>Am eating</b> indicates an action taking place at the time of speaking.</p>	<p>I <i>will be eating</i> pizza when you arrive. <b>Will be eating</b> indicates an uncompleted action that will take place in the future.</p>
<b>Perfect</b>	<p>I <i>had eaten</i> all of the pizza when you arrived. <b>Had eaten</b> indicates a completed action that has already happened.</p>	<p>I <i>have eaten</i> all of the pizza. <b>Have eaten</b> indicates a past action that is not defined by a specific time.</p>	<p>I <i>will have eaten</i> all of the pizza by tonight. <b>Will have eaten</b> indicates an action that will be complete before another action takes place.</p>
<b>Perfect Progressive (Continuous)</b>	<p>I <i>had been eating</i> pizza for two hours when you arrived. <b>Had been eating</b> indicates a past action that began before a certain point and continued until that time.</p>	<p>I <i>have been eating</i> pizza for two hours. <b>Have been eating</b> indicates an action which started at some point in the past and may or may not be complete.</p>	<p>I <i>will already have been eating</i> pizza for two hours when you arrive. <b>Will have been eating</b> indicates an action that will continue for some time and will not be complete at a certain point in the future.</p>

\*adapted from "The 12 Verb Tenses–Usage," source unknown