



A SHORT GUIDE TO THE ENGLISH TENSES

PRESENT TENSES

Present simple

Structure: Subj pronoun/noun + present tense

Description: We use the present simple to express daily routines.

Remember: 'He', 'she' and 'it' in the present simple carry an 's'.

Examples:

'He arrives at work at 9am every morning.'

'How often do you go to the gym?'

'She doesn't take the bus to school every day. Sometimes she walks.'

Imperative tense

Structure: Noun (optional) + present tense.

Description: We use the imperative tense for commands. You never use the subject pronoun (i.e. 'you') with the imperative because it would be considered rude.

Remember: Because the imperative addresses an individual or group directly, you never use it in third person.

Examples:

'Take out the rubbish at the end of the day.'

'Don't answer the phone. I know who it is and I don't want to talk to them.'

'Children sit down. Class is about to begin.'

Present continuous

Structure: Subj pronoun/noun + to be + gerund

Description: We use the present continuous to refer to actions happening now. This is considered the *real* present tense because we only use the present simple for routines.

For example: You do not say, 'I prepare pizza' for an action happening now. You say, 'I am preparing pizza.'

More examples:

'She isn't listening to the teacher. Instead, she is drawing in her notebook.'

'What are you doing right now?' 'I am writing a report, what about you?'

'Workmen are working on the road and so access is blocked.'

PAST TENSES

Past simple

Structure: Subj pronoun/noun + past simple + infinitive or noun

Description: We use the past simple for actions that are finished. This is called 'closed time.'

We use the past simple for times such as: 'Yesterday', 'last week', 'last month', 'last year', 'this morning' (if it's afternoon), '9 o'clock' (if it's past 9am) and 'ago'.

Examples:

'I saw her 5 seconds ago.'

'Did she go for a long run with her running club yesterday?'

'I didn't close the window when I left the office, so I called the security guard and told him to close it.'

Past continuous

Structure: Subj pronoun/noun + was/were + gerund

Description: We use the past continuous to express:

- A) A long duration of time which is now finished, often with the word 'all'.

For example:

'We were studying all weekend.'

'Were you watching TV all day?'

- B) As a context for a story. The context is in past continuous while the event is with the past simple.

For example:

'I was listening to music when the doorbell rang.'

'They were jogging in the park when they saw the robbery.'

- C) With 'while' and 'meanwhile' to express that two things are happening at the same time.

For example:

'He was studying while listening to music.'

'I was working, meanwhile my wife was having car problems.'

Present perfect

Structure: Subject pronoun/noun + have + verb participle

Description: We use present perfect for a time that started in the past and continues until now. The action can be finished but the time continues. This is called 'open time.'

We use the present perfect is for things like: 'Today', 'this week', 'this month', 'this year', 'so far' and 'have you ever....?' (in your life).

Examples:

'She has spoken to her boss today.' (Speaking to her boss happened in the past but today continues).

'They haven't called me this week but we spoke last week, so I know what to do.'

'How many lessons has he taught this week?'

Have you ever + participle

'Have you ever...?' means 'has it happened, one time?'

For example: 'Have you ever been to New York?'

If the answer is negative it is common to use 'never.'

For example: 'No, I have never been to New York.'

'I haven't never been to New York,' is not correct because it's a double negative.

Present perfect continuous

Structure: Subject pronoun/noun + have + been + verb in gerund

Description: We use the present perfect continuous for actions that start in the past and continue until now. For this reason, it is often used to express a duration of time.

For example,

How long you have been...?

- Living
- Studying
- Working
- Doing a sports or activity

More examples:

'I have been working at my company for five years.'

'How long have you been living in the city?' 'I have been living in the city for 5 years.'

'He has been reading that book since this morning.'

'She has been playing basketball since she was a teenager.'

Past perfect

Structure: Subject pronoun/noun + had + participle

Description: We use the past perfect when there are two actions in a sentence and you need to express the order in which they happened. The past perfect expresses the first action and the past simple, the second.

For example:

'I had bought the insurance before I picked up the car.'

Event one (buying the insurance) is past perfect and event two (picking up the car) is past simple.

More examples:

'She had already got a new job before she quit.'

'Had you checked the recipe before you baked the cake?'

'Used to' for time

Structure: Subject pronoun/noun + used + infinitive

Description: We use 'used to' to express a repetitive action in the past which is now finished.

Remember: Because 'used to' only expresses things that are finished, you can't use it for permanent characteristics. For example, if you say, 'my brother used to be tall as a teenager', you're now saying that he is short. Instead, you must use the past simple and say, 'my brother was tall as a teenager.'

Examples:

'He used to drive to work but now he cycles.'

'Did you use to play football at school?'

'How often did they use to go to the gym?'

'I didn't use to like vegetables as a child, but now I love them.'

Note: The present of 'used to' is 'usually'

Structure: Subject pronoun/noun + usually + present tense

Description: 'Usually' is for things you normally do in the present.

Examples:

'What time do you usually get up?' 'I usually get up at 7am.'

'How often do you usually take the car to work?'

FUTURE TENSES

Going to

Structure: Subj pronoun/noun + to be + going + infinitive

Description: 'Going to' means a fixed plan in the future.

Examples:

'He is going to play football on Saturday.'

'Are you going to go to the cinema tonight, or should we cancel?'

'We are not going to buy a new car until the spring.'

Will

Structure: Subj pronoun/noun + will + infinitive (no 'to')

Description: 'Will' expresses future with a 90% probability of something happening. If you say, 'I am going to catch the bus this afternoon,' you will catch the bus for certain. If you say, 'I will catch the bus this afternoon,' there is an element of doubt.

'Will', in fact, has three distinctive meanings all based on probability. These are:

a) Intention, for example:

'She will study this weekend (provided that she doesn't get distracted).'

'We will go for a picnic this afternoon (provided that the weather is good).'

b) Offer of help, for example:

'I'll open the door for you.'

'They'll take you to the airport this morning.'

c) Prediction, for example:

'I think Brazil will win the championship.'

'It looks like it will rain tomorrow.'

'Will' is a modal verb. This means that the question and negative are made within the verb rather than using an auxiliary.

Examples:

'I won't buy any more plastic bags to help the environment.'

'Will you come with me to the library?'

'They won't be able to finish their work, if you keep distracting them.'

Present continuous for future

Structure: Subj pronoun/noun + to be + verb + gerund + future time marker

Description: We use present continuous for future in the same way as 'going to'; that is, for plans and certainties.

Examples:

'John is taking his driving test next week.' The test is booked, and he will definitely take it.

'I am studying next weekend, as I have a test the following Monday.'

Present simple for future

Structure: Subj pronoun/noun + present simple + future time marker.

Description: When speaking about a written schedule, such as a bus timetable or a cinema programme, it is acceptable to use present to mean future.

Examples:

'The bus leaves at 8pm tonight.' (Tonight is the future, but the speaker uses present simple because this information comes from a timetable that will not change in the immediate future.)

'The film starts at 7pm on Tuesday.'

'The flight arrives at 4am tomorrow morning.'

Future perfect

Structure: Subject pronoun/noun + will + have + participle + object + a 'time clause' + subject pronoun/noun + present simple

Description: The future perfect expresses a future action that will happen *before* another future action.

For example: 'I will have saved enough money to go travelling before I quit my job.'

There are two future actions in this sentence: 'Saving money' and 'quitting my job.' We understand from the tense that 'saving money' will occur before 'quitting my job.'

Note: The second half of the sentence is in present, not future, even though both actions occur in the future.

More examples:

'I will have spent all my money this month before I get paid.'

'He will have decorated the living room by the time you get back from holiday.'

'By the end of the year, I will have completed the course.'

'By the time I turn 30, I will have bought a new car.'

CONDITIONAL TENSES

Zero conditional

Structure: If + present + noun/pronoun + present (or imperative tense)

Description: The zero conditional refers something that is always true or an imperative sentence with 'if.'

For example:

'If you heat ice, it turns to water.'

Remember: With the imperative tense there is no subject pronoun.

More examples:

'If you go to school, take your bag with you.'

'If you like chocolate, then eat some.'

First conditional

Structure: If + present + will + infinitive (no 'to').

Description: The first conditional expresses a probable future.

Examples:

'If it's sunny this weekend, we will go to the beach.'

'If I don't get paid this Friday, I won't go to the cinema.'

'If you buy a dog, where will you take it for walks?'

Can

Be careful with 'can'. Its infinitive is 'to be able to' and so with 'will', it's 'will be able to.'

For example:

'If she can paint, she will be able to paint a picture for you.'

'If I don't have time, I won't be able to pick you up from the station.'

Second conditional

Structure: If + past + would + infinitive (no 'to')

Description: The second conditional expresses a hypothetical situation.

For example:

'If I had a cat, I would let it sleep on the sofa.' (This is a hypothetical situation, because the speaker doesn't have a cat. But it is not impossible, because he/she could get one.)

'If she knew Spanish, she would live in Spain.'

Was and were

Officially, 'was' changes to 'were' in all cases in the second conditional. (However, it is common to hear 'was' in speech.)

For example:

'If it were snowing, I would put on a sweater.'

'If there were a party in the room next door, I would go out.'

Third conditional

Structure: If + past perfect + would + present perfect

Description: The third conditional refers to something that happened in alternative past, meaning it is therefore impossible.

Examples:

'If she had studied architecture, she would have become an architect.'

'If they had been sick, they wouldn't have come to the party.'

'If I had felt like walking to class, I wouldn't have caught a taxi.'

Mixed conditional

Structure: If + past perfect + would + infinitive (no 'to')

Description: With a mixed conditional, the first clause is third conditional, referring to an alternative past and the second clause, second conditional referring to a hypothetical present. We use it when we want to speculate how our present could be different if we had done something differently in the past.

Examples:

'If I had taken chemistry instead of physics at university, I would have a better paid job now.'

'If the financial crisis hadn't happened, Europe would be richer now.'