

A Short Recap of the Past Tenses

1/ The past simple.

Use: the past simple is the main tense used in English to narrate the past. If an event is clearly situated in the past, with indications of time (ten minutes ago, in 2006, yesterday, etc.), use this tense.

E.g. *Last weekend, we went to Marseille to see family.*

Mitterrand was elected President in 1981.

Note: there is no historical present in English. You cannot write: *Mitterrand is elected President in 1981.*

Form: the past simple is generally formed by adding “-ed” to regular verbs. *I walked to work yesterday.* If a verb ends in “e”, just add a “d”: *He arrived late.* If a short verb (one syllable) ends with a vowel and a consonant, double the consonant: to tap – *She tapped on the door.* If a verb ends with a “y”, change it to “i”: try – *I tried to cook dinner.*

There are quite a lot of irregular verbs, many of which are very common: to be, was/were, been; have, had, had; go, went, gone. See the [Cambridge list here](#).

Exercises: [here are some exercises by test-english.com](#).

2/ The past continuous.

Use: the past continuous is mainly used to contrast continuous or on-going activities in the past with shorter, momentary actions that use the past simple.

E.g. *I was taking a bath, when the doorbell rang.*

Form: the past continuous is formed by using the verb “to be” in the past simple (I was, you were, etc.) plus the present participle (the base form of the verb plus “-ing”). *We were starting the meeting, when the fire alarm went off.*

Exercises: [here are some exercises by test-english.com](#).

3/ The past perfect (or pluperfect)

Use: the past perfect is used to narrate an event that occurred before the main action you are discussing, which takes the past simple.

E.g. *When he arrived at the meeting, he realised that he had forgotten his phone at home.*

Here the main action is taking place when he arrives at the meeting. Forgetting the phone took place earlier.

Form: The past perfect is formed using the verb “to have” in the past simple followed by the past participle.

Exercises: [here are some exercises from test-english.com](#).

4/ The present perfect

Use: the present perfect is used: i) for actions that started in the past and continue into the present, or have an impact on the present; ii) for actions which create a present “state of being”, which create a certain quality; and iii) for actions that took place at an unspecified moment in the past, and again create a state of being or quality. It is common to use both the **present perfect simple** for states, qualities and general truths.

E.g. *Nothing has changed.* This describes a state that began in the past.

I have stopped eating meat. This is a final decision which was made sometime in the past, but is still true.

By contrast, the **present perfect continuous** is used for actions still going on. It is more immediate than the present perfect simple.

E.g. *We have been living in Paris since last year.* (This suggests that living in Paris is recent, and maybe temporary.)

I have been taking the metro to work this week. This suggests that the speaker normally travels to work differently, say by car or bicycle, but for some reason is taking the metro that particular week.

Form: the **present perfect simple** is formed by using “to have” in the present as an auxiliary, plus the past participle.

The **present perfect continuous** is formed using “to have” in the present + been + present participle (-ing).

Exercises: [here are some more exercises from test-english.com](#).