

13 The present

*lose speaks
do they work?
does she understand?
is sleeping 'll go*

Key considerations

Many learners are confused by the number of tense forms we use for expressing present time in English – in choosing the appropriate form we are obliged to make distinctions that many learners find unfamiliar and unclear. They often like teachers to introduce or draw attention to the different uses of the different forms separately and with clear rules of thumb for using them. Subsequently, learners usually like to focus on examples of how we choose and use these tenses in real conversation and text.

Most learners find that the forms of the present simple that we use to ask questions and make negative statements are particularly complex. They often continue to make mistakes long after they have understood the relevant rules. It is unrealistic to expect learners to ‘get the form of the present simple right’ before they study other tense forms.

Although we consider the present perfect in Chapter 16, some of its uses express present meanings, and learners may use a present tense in its place.

Present simple

This tense is also called the ‘simple present’.

Form

In looking at the form of the present simple tense we need to make a distinction between verbs used with a third person singular subject (e.g. *he, she, it, Barbara, a book*) and verbs with other subjects (e.g. *I, you, Lauren and Jack, the books*).

Verbs with third person singular subjects

	Question word	does or doesn't	Subject	does not or doesn't	Base form	Base form + s
Affirmative			<i>The race</i>			<i>starts</i> <i>in Paris.</i>
Question	<i>(Why)</i>	<i>does</i>	<i>this machine</i>		<i>make</i>	<i>a noise?</i>
		<i>doesn't</i>	<i>this machine</i>		<i>make</i>	<i>a noise?</i>
Negative			<i>She</i>	<i>doesn't</i>	<i>get up</i>	<i>early.</i>

The s or es that we add to the base form is often called ‘the third person s’.

tense and aspect
pp 138–9.

base forms
p 170
pronunciation/
spelling
pp 191–2

Verbs with other subjects

	Question word	does or doesn't	Subject	does not or doesn't	Base form	
Affirmative			<i>Trees</i>		lose	<i>their leaves in autumn.</i>
Question	<i>(What)</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>you</i>		<i>want</i>	<i>to eat?</i>
		<i>don't</i>	<i>you</i>		<i>want</i>	<i>to eat?</i>
Negative			<i>I</i>	<i>don't</i>	<i>believe</i>	<i>you.</i>

When do we use the present simple?

Main use: general actions, events and states

We use the present simple to describe general actions, events and states when we have no reason to think of them as being in any way temporary or limited in time.

For teaching purposes we sometimes break this use down into 'repeated events' and 'general facts'.

Repeated events

I get up early.

We can show this use diagrammatically.



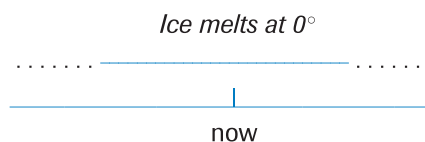
We often use adverbs of frequency (e.g. *always, usually*) and expressions of repeated time (e.g. *on Tuesdays, in the summer, twice a year*) with this use of the present simple. We also often focus on 'habitual behaviour' in presenting this use to learners.

General facts

Ice melts at 0°.

I live in London.

We can show this use diagrammatically.



We often focus on ‘timeless facts’ in presenting this use to learners.

In special circumstances we can also use the present simple to describe temporary states and actions. We look at examples of this below.

Other uses

State verbs

We use the present simple with certain verbs to refer to ‘states’, even when we think of them as being temporary. These include:

- existence: *be, exist*.
- mental states: *believe, doubt, know, realise, recognise, suppose, think, understand*.
- wants and likes: *want, like, love, hate, need, prefer*.
- possession: *belong, have¹, possess, own*.
- senses: *feel, smell, taste*.
- appearance *appear, look, seem*.

*I **don't** understand.*

¹We use *have/has got* as a very common alternative to *have/has* to express possession and a range of related meanings such as family relationships, ailments, physical characteristics, e.g. *I haven't got any sisters. Have you got a headache?* Although the form of this expression is not present simple, the meaning is the same as *have/has*. Some people try to avoid *have/has got*, particularly in formal written English.

Perception verbs

We sometimes find perception verbs (e.g. *hear, see*) listed with state verbs. However, we tend to use *can* and *can't* with these perception verbs more often than the present simple.

***Can** you hear anything?*

Running commentary

Sports commentators use the present simple (as well, sometimes, as the present continuous) in ‘running commentaries’ on broadcast sports events. The present simple saves time when the action is fast.

*Federer **serves** to Nadal and runs to the net.*

It's rare that we need to teach this use, although we sometimes need to be able to explain it.

Past narrative

In exceptional circumstances we can also use the present simple to refer to past time. This is sometimes referred to as the ‘historic present’.



We sometimes use this tense instead of the past simple to create a sense of immediacy in certain kinds of informal, spoken narrative such as comic and dramatic story-telling (e.g. *So this man walks into a bar and takes out a gun ...*).

This tense is also used in newspaper headlines for the same reasons (e.g. *Floods leave hundreds homeless*).

Verbs which change things

We also use the present simple in making pronouncements which actually change something. This usually involves a small number of verbs (e.g. *arrest, baptise, declare, pronounce*) known as ‘performative’ verbs.

I pronounce you husband and wife.

I declare the fête open.

We generally have to have some special authority (e.g. to be a member of the police or the clergy) to perform these actions. Teaching learners to use these verbs is probably very low on our list of priorities, but we may need to explain why this tense is used.

Pronunciation and spelling: third person s

Pronunciation

In the third person (i.e. after singular subjects like *he, she, it, the dog, Fred*) we add *s* to the base form of main verbs other than *be*.

Base form: *live*

Third person singular form: *lives*

The pronunciation of the final *s* varies according to the final sound of the base form. It may be pronounced /ɪz/, /s/ or /z/.

Learners very frequently fail to pronounce this final *s*, even when they have reached a very high level of proficiency in the language. This may sometimes be a problem of pronunciation, but it may also be a problem of grammar (i.e. a problem of remembering that it should be there). It may also be affected by the fact that the final *s* conveys no meaning – it is purely a formal requirement. Teachers sometimes pay a lot of attention to this ‘problem’, but it is one which seems to resolve itself only if and when an individual learner chooses to make formal accuracy a major priority.

Spelling

The spelling of the final *s* varies according to the final sound of the infinitive. We sometimes add *es* to the infinitive, and we sometimes add *s*.

+ es

We add *es* to infinitives which end in the following letters or combinations of letters:

<i>ch</i>	<i>watches</i>
<i>s</i>	<i>kisses</i>
<i>sh</i>	<i>wishes</i>
<i>z</i>	<i>fizzes</i>
<i>x</i>	<i>faxes</i>

We also added *es* to most infinitives which end in a combination of consonant + single *o* (e.g. *goes, does*).

y + es

We remove final *y* and add *es* to infinitives that end in consonant + *y*.

<i>cry</i>	⇒	<i>cries</i>
<i>worry</i>	⇒	<i>worries</i>

+ s

We add *s* to other infinitives (e.g. *loves, reads, pays, rages*). *Have* changes to *has*.

Present continuous

This tense is also called the 'present progressive'.

Form

We form the present continuous with a present tense form of *to be* (*am, is, are*), and an *-ing* verb form. The present tense forms of *be* are frequently contracted (*'m, 's, 're, etc.*).

	Question word	<i>am/is/are</i>	Subject	<i>am/is/are</i>	<i>not or +n't</i>	<i>-ing</i> form	
Affirmative			<i>People</i>	<i>are</i>		<i>beginning</i>	<i>to leave.</i>
Question	<i>(Where)</i>	<i>are</i>	<i>they</i>			<i>going?</i>	
Negative			<i>She</i>		<i>isn't</i>	<i>making</i>	<i>a noise.</i>

When do we use the present continuous?**Main use: temporary events and actions**

We generally use the present continuous to refer to something temporary which has begun and has not finished, something which is completable and is in the process of being completed. What is important is that the action or event is taking place for a limited period of time which includes the moment

of speaking. Events can be constant, but they can also be repeated or intermittent, and not necessarily happening at the moment of speaking.

We can show these uses diagrammatically.

Sssh. He's sleeping.

[—————]



now, i.e. the moment of speaking

I'm getting up early this week.

[X X X X]



now, i.e. the moment of speaking

Other uses

Changing and developing states

When we describe changing or developing states (e.g. using verbs like *become, decline, decrease, develop, expand, get, grow*) we use the present continuous even though we don't necessarily think of the process as being temporary.

*Moral standards **are declining**.*

Habitual action

We normally use the present simple to refer to things we do on a regular basis. However with certain time expressions (e.g. *all the time, always, constantly, continually, forever*) we can also use the present continuous.

*They're forever **asking** me to visit them.*

We use the present continuous in this way to stress the repetitiveness of an action and sometimes (but not necessarily) to express our irritation with this.

State verbs

Although we give learners the rule of thumb that we can't use state verbs in the present continuous, in reality we sometimes use verbs that express likes, wants, mental states, senses and appearance in this tense in order to give special emphasis to the temporariness of the state.

***Are you wanting** another drink?* (addressing a friend with an empty glass)

*Sssh, I'm **thinking** what I want to say.*

Things happening now

Learners are sometimes taught that we use the present continuous for ‘things happening now’, and they may even get into the habit of tagging *now* onto every expression which contains the present continuous (e.g. *She’s having lunch now*).

The ‘happening now’ rule of thumb is not very helpful. In the first place we also use the present continuous to refer to future time. In the second place we can use lots of other tenses to refer to what is happening now (e.g. *He’s been talking for the last ten minutes, She understands*), and indeed we often use other tenses with the adverb *now* (**Now** *she understands, She’s arrived now*). Most importantly, however, this rule of thumb doesn’t describe the main and real reasons we choose to use this tense to talk about the present, i.e. to make clear that something is temporary and incomplete.

Tagging the adverb onto expressions which use the present continuous can also be counter-productive. Many languages rely entirely on adverbs to express that an action is temporary, and it is a problem for many learners to get used to using a verb form (i.e. continuous aspect) to express this in English. If we actively encourage learners to use *now* where it isn’t necessary, this may encourage them to rely on adverbs rather than choosing appropriate tense forms.

Will ('ll) + bare infinitive

We sometimes use *will ('ll)* + bare infinitive to express repeated and typical actions. This use is very clearly illustrated in the text which follows. A young actor is being interviewed about his lifestyle. (A Harley-Davidson is kind of motorbike.)

When I get a day off, which is very rare, *I’ll take* my Harley-Davidson out. *I’ll ride* up the coast and have fun, or visit my parents. I live very close to Malibu now and they live ten minutes from me – close enough to visit whenever I want to and far enough away not to see them every day. At the weekends, friends *will come* over and *we’ll play* basketball. Most of them are producers and writers; I don’t hang out with many actors and actresses.

We may choose not to teach learners to use *will* in this way, but the use is common and we need to be prepared to help learners when they come across it. Course materials often ignore this use but teach the equivalent *would* to express repeated and typical actions in the past.



future with
present
continuous
pp 201–2



would
p 250

Typical difficulties for learners

Comprehension

Learners generally have far more difficulty in using present tenses correctly than in understanding them. Even if they don't know or are unclear about the difference in meaning between different tenses, in most cases there is plenty of information in the context to help them understand whether, for example, an action is temporary or not.

Form and meaning

What can be misleading for learners is coming across forms used with present meaning that they associate with other time periods. In particular, they may assume that *will* refers to the future and that the present perfect refers to the past in instances where this is not the case.

Speaking and writing

Choosing between present simple and continuous

When learners choose the wrong tense their meaning is still usually clear. However, the mistakes are sometimes very noticeable.

It is more common for learners to use the present simple when the present continuous is appropriate than vice versa. This may be the result of a tendency for learners to simplify and standardise. For some learners it may also be because their own language indicates the temporariness of something only in special cases.

**What do you do with my handbag?*

When learners use the present continuous in place of the present simple, this is often with verbs that can't normally be used in a continuous form.

**I'm not believing you.*

**Are you hearing any noise?*

Omitting 'third person s'

Many learners forget the 'third person s' even when they have reached a high level of accuracy and general competence in the language.

**My father smoke too much.*

**She believe I lied to her.*

Omitting auxiliary verbs

Learners may simplify the grammar of a verb phrase consisting of two or more words, especially when struggling to communicate. Typically, they leave out (one of) the auxiliary verb(s).

**He not speak to me now.*

**I writing to you ...*

Question and negative forms of the present simple

Many learners need a lot of practice before using the rules for making questions and negative statements accurately.

Sometimes they may over-generalise the 'third person s' rule.

**Does he likes classical music?*

They may also simply leave out the auxiliary (this is particularly common after question words such as *how, when, where, who*, etc.).

**What you want?*

**He not speak French?*

Consolidation exercises

Differences in meaning

Explain the differences in meaning between the sentences in each of the following groups, referring where appropriate to contexts in which one or other might be preferred.

- (i) She smokes.
She's smoking.
- (ii) Are you wanting to go home?
Do you want to go home?
- (iii) Are you liking the concert?
Do you like the concert?
- (iv) She always brings me flowers.
She's always bringing me flowers.
- (v) He's got a bath.
He has a bath.
He's having a bath.

Language in context

The following is part of an interview with Judy Bennett. She and her husband Charles both act in a popular soap opera called 'The Archers'. Read the text and answer the questions that follow.

There is no set pattern to our days. Whichever one of us *is not working* (1) does the housework and cooking. Charles *does* (2) his own washing and if I'm working, he'll *do* (3) mine, too. He quite enjoys it; we have always done things that way. He does the flowers too. I *like* (4) flower arranging, but I can't do it and Charles is quite critical, so I don't try it now. I like weeding and reading – I'm never without a book, especially on my journeys to Birmingham! What we do in the evenings depends on Jane. She *gets* (5) home from school between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. I like watching soaps on television. Well, you have to keep up with the opposition! We also listen to 'The Archers' from time to time – we *don't* always *know* (6) what *is happening* (7) if we've not been in a few episodes.

- a Identify the tense of each of the verbs which is printed in italics in the text. In each case account for the choice of tense.
- b Look at the following words or expressions: *always*, *never*, *now*. What tense or tenses do you generally associate them with? Check which tenses these words or expressions are used with in the text. Explain any examples of 'untypical' use.
- c The following sentences are from another part of the text above. For each sentence decide which of the two tenses is appropriate and justify your choice.

- (i) If Charles and I *record/are recording* 'The Archers' there is no 'typical' day.
- (ii) Our home in London *has/is having* a pool, so I *swim/am swimming* regularly.
- (iii) I've *been/am* in the show for 22 years now.

Answers to consolidation exercises

Differences in meaning

The following answers involve an element of speculation since no context for the sentences is provided. The explanations given are the most likely, but others may also be possible.

- (i) The first sentence describes a fact about the person. It tells us about one of her habits. The second expresses something temporary. Depending on the context, this may be what she is doing now, or it may describe, for example, an ex-smoker's temporary relapse.
- (ii), (iii) We generally teach the second of these uses as being correct, and may provide the rule of thumb that *want* and *like* are 'state verbs'. If we use them to refer to general wants and likes (*I want peace; I like music*) we do have to use the present simple. However, if they refer to something temporary (e.g. wanting to leave a party; feelings about a particular concert that is still unfinished), we can use continuous tenses. In these cases the first sentence in each pair is appropriate and correct.
- (iv) The second of these sentences stresses the regularity or frequency of the action. We often use this combination of tense and adverb to express irritation. We may see the action as in some way temporary (i.e. one day she'll stop doing this). The first sentence expresses a fact about the person. It tells us about her routine behaviour.
- (v) The first sentence tells us something about the person's possessions (in American English we would probably make this clearer by saying *a bathtub*). Depending on the context, the second sentence could mean the same as the first or it could refer to the regular action of taking a bath (e.g. *In the mornings he has a bath not a shower.*). The third sentence can only refer to the action of taking a bath (e.g. *Sorry, he can't come to the phone just now. He's having a bath.*) since we wouldn't use *have* in a continuous form to express possession.

Language in context

- a
 - (1) present continuous: this use implies 'at any particular point in time' within a temporary period.
 - (2) present simple: this describes routine behaviour, a fact about the person.
 - (3) *will ('ll) + infinitive*: superficially this sentence resembles a conditional type 1 sentence. In fact, however, this refers to the present, not to the future. *Will* is used here to describe regular or habitual actions.
 - (4) present simple: this is a permanent state, a fact about the person.
 - (5) present simple: this describes routine behaviour, a fact about the person.
 - (6) present simple: this is a general fact about their lives.
 - (7) present continuous: this refers to events which are temporary and which are occurring at specific points of time, i.e. those times when they don't know what is happening.
- b The way we teach adverbs of frequency often leads learners to use them only with the present simple tense. This text shows that they can be used with a wider range of tenses: the first instance of *always* occurs with the present perfect, and *never* with the present tense of *to be*.

Learners also often associate *now* only with the present continuous tense. In this text we find it used with the present simple. This expresses a contrast between past and present; something has changed – *now* suggests that she used to do flower arranging.

- c (i) *are recording*: the continuous form suggests that recording is a temporary process, i.e. there are periods where they are making recordings, and then periods where they are not.
- (ii) *has, swim*: both these verbs describe general facts – a feature of the house and a habit respectively.
- (iii) *I've been*: the present perfect expresses the idea of 'until now'.

14 The future

*'I'll see am going to have
shall let will have finished
shan't be needing
going to be working*

Key considerations

Some languages have a single 'future tense', whereas English uses a lot of different verb forms to refer to future time (e.g. *will*, *going to*, *will be + -ing*). Learners often find it bewildering to have to choose an appropriate form from so many, and in general, choosing forms is more problematic than constructing them.

Most learners want rules of thumb to help them choose appropriate forms, but these rules of thumb are also sometimes problematic.

- Some of these rules of thumb depend on apparently 'fuzzy' distinctions (for example, the difference between an 'arrangement' and a 'plan'; between a prediction which is based on present or past evidence and one which is not).
- More than in most areas of grammar, the rules of thumb for choosing between future tenses are approximate. These rules of thumb are based on the meaning we want to express. However, in making choices we are also influenced by personal preferences and stylistic factors. Most real texts and transcriptions of speech which include future tenses include choices not accounted for by the rules of thumb.

In the early stages of learning, teachers and materials often concentrate on one future form, and encourage learners to use this as though it were a general 'future tense'. Usually this form is *going to*.

In this chapter we look at the most common future forms, and consider the meanings as though they were clear and separate. These definitions of meaning are the ones we usually give to learners. On pages 207–10 we explore some of the other factors that influence our choice of tenses.

We look at the different future forms in roughly the order they occur in most courses. We concentrate on meaning much more than on form but there are cross-references to the pages that deal with form in more detail.

In Chapter 11 we look at modal verbs. These can normally refer to the future as well as the present.

Going to

Form

We generally refer to this form as the *going to* future, and teach it as *be + going to + bare infinitive*. It is also logical to think of this as the present continuous form of *go + the full infinitive*.

	Question word	am/ is/ are	Subject	am/is/ are or 'm/'s/'re	not or n't	going to	Bare infinitive	
Affirmative			<i>I</i>	<i>'m</i>		<i>going to</i>	<i>have</i>	<i>a wash.</i>
Question	<i>(When)</i>	<i>are</i>	<i>they</i>			<i>going to</i>	<i>leave?</i>	
Negative			<i>We</i>	<i>aren't</i>		<i>going to</i>	<i>make</i>	<i>a fuss.</i>

When do we use *going to*?

Going to has two main uses:

- planned future events (i.e. the intention is premeditated).

*We're **going to** spend a few days with my Mother.*

- predictions based on present or past evidence.

*It's **going to** rain.*

We often teach these two uses quite separately. In fact they are closely related since both of them have a basis in present or past evidence (in the one case this is a decision we have made about our own actions and in the other it is something that helps us to predict external actions or events).

Present continuous

Form

The form of the present continuous is covered in Chapter 13.

When do we use the present continuous?

Arrangements

We use the present continuous to refer to the future when arrangements have been made (for example, we have made a booking, bought tickets, or someone is expecting us to do something or be somewhere at a particular time), and we

often refer to this use as the 'arranged future'. We usually specify a future time such as *next week*, *at Christmas*, unless it is already clear that we are referring to the future rather than the present.

*Nobody's **working** on Monday the 5th.*

Only people can make arrangements. Consequently we use this tense only when people are responsible for the action.

*The hospital **is closing** next week. (NOT *It is raining tomorrow.)*

Go and come

Some people don't like to say or write *going to go* and *going to come*, and they use *going* and *coming* instead. In this case the events may only be planned and not necessarily 'arranged'.

*I'm **coming** (**going**) home early on Friday.*

Will ('ll, won't)

Form

We use these forms with the bare infinitive of the main verb.

Subject	will ('ll, won't)	Bare infinitive	
<i>I</i>	<i>'ll</i>	<i>go</i>	<i>soon.</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>won't</i>	<i>let</i>	<i>the children bother you.</i>

We form questions by inverting the position of *will* ('ll, won't) and the subject.

Will you wait?

We tend to choose the full form *will* when we are writing or speaking formally, and often in informal speech after nouns and noun phrases (as opposed to pronouns). In informal speaking and writing we use 'll after:

- pronouns in affirmative sentences (e.g. *she'll, we'll*).
- question words (e.g. *when'll, who'll*).

If students choose the full form *will* when they're speaking, we need to be careful that they don't stress it as this can suggest a degree of obstinate insistence.

'll not (e.g. *I'm afraid I'll **not** be there*) rather than *won't* is the standard negative form in some regions of the United Kingdom.

When do we use *will* ('ll, won't)?

Just as we generally teach that we choose *going to* to refer to planned future events and predictions based on present or past evidence, we generally teach that we choose *will* or 'll:

- for unplanned future events.
- to make predictions that aren't based on present or past evidence.

We often teach unplanned events in the context of making decisions or offers spontaneously (i.e. the intention is unpremeditated).

I'll do that for you.

We often teach predictions that aren't based on present or past evidence as:

- guesses based on characteristic behaviour.

I bet he'll bring his mother.

- assertions of faith about the future.

We'll never lose an election in this constituency.

Shall (shan't)

After *I* and *we*, we can choose between *will* and *shall*, and *won't* and *shan't*. We use *shall* and *shan't* with the bare infinitive in exactly the same way as we use *will* ('ll, won't).

Subject	<i>shall</i> (<i>shan't</i>)	Bare infinitive	
<i>I</i>	<i>shall</i>	<i>go</i>	<i>soon.</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>shan't</i>	<i>let</i>	<i>the children bother you.</i>

The question form places *shall/shan't* before the subject.

Shall we go?

Shall is usually pronounced as a weak form /ʃəl/.

When do we use *shall* (*shan't*)?

Some people consistently choose *shall* and *shan't* in preference to *will* and *won't* after *I* and *we*. Other people never use these forms. Modern teaching materials tend to ignore this use of *shall* altogether. Some older materials misleadingly teach that *shall* and *shan't* are the only correct forms to use after *I* and *we*.

In question forms we generally use *shall* only to make offers and suggestions.

Present simple

Form

The form of the present simple is covered in Chapter 13.

When do we use the present simple?

Timetables and programmes

We use the present simple to anticipate things on the basis of a timetable or programme, often when we are referring to itineraries and travel arrangements, or entertainments and planned public events.

*The next train **leaves** at 6.30. **Does** the play **start** at 8.00 or 8.15?*

When we use the present simple to refer to the future, we usually specify precise times and often use the following verbs: *come, arrive, start (begin), go, leave (depart), finish (end)*.

People sometimes argue that we use the present simple in this way because we see these events as being factually certain or regular occurrences.

After conjunctions

We usually teach that after conjunctions of time (e.g. *after, as soon as, before, by the time, if, till, when, while, unless, until*) we don't use future tenses. Instead we use a present tense to refer to the future. This is often the present simple but, according to what we want to express, we can also use the present continuous or the present perfect.

Present simple: *I'll get back to you when he **arrives**.*

Present continuous: *I'll ask her to phone you as soon as she's **feeling** better.*

Present perfect: *I shan't speak to you until you've **apologised**.*

Other words and phrases which function as conjunctions (not necessarily of time) are also followed by present tenses referring to the future.

*I'll give it to whoever/anyone who **comes**.*

*I'll collect him wherever/no matter where he **arrives**.*

Am/is/are + infinitive

Form

The form of this is very simple.

Subject	am/is/are	Infinitive
<i>He</i>	<i>isn't</i>	<i>to leave.</i>



When do we use *am/is/are* + infinitive?

We use *am/is/are* + infinitive for events (activities or states) we see as being in some sense inevitable. Often they have been determined by some external and, perhaps, official body and so an element of obligation is also implied.

The whole cast is to assemble on stage after the performance. (i.e. this has been determined by the director)

Continuous, perfect and perfect continuous forms of future tenses

Course materials often focus on the continuous, perfect and perfect continuous forms of *will* and *'ll*, and ignore the fact that we also use continuous, perfect and perfect continuous forms of *shall* and *going to*.

Continuous form

We replace the bare infinitive (main verb) with *be + ing* to form the continuous form of future tenses.

Subject	<i>will/shall/be going to</i>	<i>be + ing</i>	
<i>I</i>	<i>'ll</i>	<i>be having</i>	<i>dinner.</i>
<i>Dorothy</i>	<i>is going to</i>	<i>be working</i>	<i>late.</i>
<i>We</i>	<i>shan't</i>	<i>be needing</i>	<i>you any more.</i>

When do we use the continuous form?

This form has two distinct uses:

- future events in progress.
- future as a matter of course.

Future events in progress

We use future continuous forms to refer to something that is predicted or programmed to begin before a particular point in the future – and, possibly, to continue after this time (e.g. *I'll be working then*).



Future as a matter of course

We also use future continuous forms as a very neutral way of referring to the future, when we want to avoid suggesting anything about intention, arrangement, prediction or willingness (e.g. *They'll be bringing the children.*).

We often teach this use of future continuous forms in the following contexts:

- reassuring people that we are not putting ourselves (or someone else) out.

She'll be going there anyway.

- sounding out plans before making a request or an offer.

Will you be using your car?

Perfect form

We replace the bare infinitive (main verb) with *have* + past participle.

Subject	<i>will/shall/be going to</i>	<i>have</i> + past participle	
<i>Nobody</i>	<i>'s going to</i>	<i>have prepared.</i>	
<i>She</i>	<i>won't</i>	<i>have arrived</i>	<i>before you.</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>shan't</i>	<i>have finished.</i>	

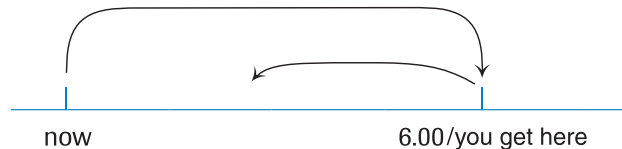
When do we use the perfect form?

We use future perfect forms to view things from a particular point in the future as already having taken place or as having been completed.

We frequently use these forms with expressions beginning *by ...* or *before ...*

She will have finished work by 6.00.

I'll have left before you get here.



Perfect continuous form

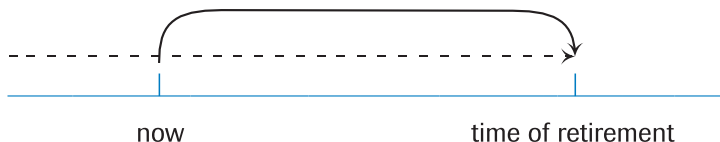
We replace the bare infinitive (main verb) with *have been* + *ing*.

Subject	<i>will/shall/be going to</i>	<i>have been</i> + <i>ing</i>
<i>He</i>	<i>'ll</i>	<i>have been living in Ghana for 40 years next July.</i>

When do we use the perfect continuous form?

We generally teach that we use future perfect continuous forms to view things from a particular point in the future when we are interested in how long they have been happening. We generally use these forms with expressions that begin with *for ...*

*She'll **have been working** there for over twenty-five years when she retires.* (The time she starts work could be before or after 'now', the time of speaking.)



State verbs in future tenses

We normally avoid using state verbs, especially *be*, in continuous forms. When we use a state verb to express something that we normally associate with continuous tenses (e.g. 'future as a matter of course'), we use a simple form instead.

***Will you be** at home tonight?* (NOT **Will you be being ...?*)

*He'll **have known** her for two years when they get married.*

(NOT **He'll have been knowing her ...*)

state verbs
pp 108-9

Other factors in choosing future tenses

Course materials generally teach that we choose between future tenses on the basis of meaning – whether or not, for example, something is:

- arranged.
- premeditated.
- predicted on the basis of present evidence.
- part of a regular itinerary.
- a state or an event.

For learners who want dependable rules of thumb to help them avoid mistakes when they speak and write, this focus on meaning may be the best policy. However, we also need to be aware that we take on board all kinds of other factors in choosing between future tenses. In particular, we often use *will* or *will be ... -ing* for predictions based on present or past evidence – when the rules of thumb we teach suggest we should use *going to*.

Below we look at some of these factors and at examples to illustrate them. Many of the examples can be attributed to more than one of the factors (e.g. both formality and type of text). Italics have been added to highlight the future tense forms.

Personal preference

This example is from a letter from a publisher to an author. The first use of *shall* is unusual.

Jeanne *shall be answering* your letter herself and I *shall shortly be arranging* for someone to read the reworked chapters.

Variety

We often vary the tenses we use simply in order to avoid repetition - particularly of *going to*.

In the first example a child is talking.

In the morning I'm *going to go* swimming. Then I'll *come back* and I'll *get* my sweets from the sweet shop. And then on Sunday in the morning we're *going to go* to church ...

In this example a TV sports journalist looks forward to the summer.

It's *going to be* a hectic time, as Wimbledon starts only three days later, where I think everyone *will watch* to see if Pete Sampras and Steffi Graf can repeat their success of last year ... We'll *be providing* our usual comprehensive coverage from the 133rd Open championship in July ...

In this example the speaker is talking to a TV audience about gardening. He freely mixes contracted and uncontracted forms.

I'll *mix* it with some compost, and then I *shall plunge* the pots in a bucket of water, then I *shall fill* the hole till the water stops running out, and then lug it so it gets a good go, and then it'll *have* to take its chances.

Formality

We often use *will* or *shall* rather than *going to* to express plans when we use language formally – particularly when we write.

The first example comes from a political manifesto.

We *will abolish* the right of the hereditary peers to vote in the House of Lords. We *will reform* the House of Commons. We *will make* sure the quangos that spend vast sums of taxpayers' money are put under public scrutiny ...

The second example was spoken during a job interview.

As we said in the letter we sent you, we *will let* you know our final decision before the end of next week.

Type of text

Will is widely used in weather forecasts to make predictions based on present evidence.

Rain *will spread* from the southwest. Tomorrow *will be* cloudy with scattered showers. The rain *will fall* mostly over coastal areas.

Shall (and also *will*) is used in books and articles to anticipate and introduce the content.

In this chapter I *shall be looking* particularly at the problems which arise when ...

In this chapter I *shall describe* the parameters for a culture-sensitive approach; in Chapter 11 I *shall exemplify* the process.

Structure

We frequently choose *will* rather than *going to* in complex constructions such as subordinate clauses (first example) and continuous or perfect forms of the verb (second example).

He said he'll phone later.

We'll be finishing at about three o'clock.

Typical difficulties for learners

Comprehension

Learners generally have far more difficulty in using future tenses correctly than in understanding them. Even if they don't know or are unclear about the difference in meaning between different tenses, in most cases there is plenty of information in the context to help them understand whether, for example, an action is premeditated or not.

Speaking and writing

The biggest problem that most learners face is that of choosing the tense which is most appropriate for expressing what they want to say. However, some learners still have problems with the form of the tenses they choose.

Choosing tenses

Over-generalising and simplifying

Learners often choose one tense to express future time in English and use it whenever they refer to the future. They sometimes choose the first form they learn or the one that is most similar to the way they express future time in their own language.

Learners often adopt *will* as their all-purpose future tense.

(**Will you go out this weekend?*)

(instead of *Are you going out...?* or *Are you going to go out ...?*)

(**I'm sorry I can't stay late. I'll play squash tonight.*)

(instead of *I'm playing ...*)

Other learners over-use *going to*.

A: *I'm afraid he isn't here this week.*

B: *Don't worry, (*I'm going to phone him tomorrow then.*

(instead of *I'll phone him ...*)

Mistakes like these are not always systematic. Some learners mix up the rules or simply forget them under the pressure of communicating. Other learners consciously or unconsciously use inappropriate rules, for example using *going to* as a 'near' future tense and *will* to refer to a more distant future.

Many learners avoid the complex continuous, perfect and perfect continuous forms. Both the meaning and the form of these constructions may seem dauntingly and unnecessarily complicated.

Time conjunctions

Learners often use a future tense instead of a present tense after time conjunctions.

**We'll call you as soon as he'll get here.*

The learner may be applying rules from her own language and/or over-generalising from the use of *'ll*. This use seems logical and learners often feel this is right even when they have learned the correct rules.

Native speakers sometimes use future tenses after time conjunctions, but students may be penalised if they do this in exams.

Present tenses

Learners sometimes over-use present tenses to refer to the future. In the text which follows, there are additional mistakes of vocabulary (e.g. *enjoy*).

Tomorrow I go (1) on a trip to Salisbury and Stonehenge. We enjoy (2) the whole day by bus. I hope it isn't (3) rain.

(1) *I'm going* (2) *We're going to enjoy* (3) *I hope it won't rain.*

Some learners who generally choose tenses appropriately may also over-use present tenses, even in a very systematic way. For example, advanced learners may consistently choose the present simple to express a spontaneous (i.e. unplanned or 'unpremeditated') decision to perform an immediate action, perhaps because they use a similar tense for this purpose in their own language.

A: *There's someone at the door.*

B: *OK. *I get it!*

Form

Using auxiliary verbs

Learners sometimes miss out auxiliary verbs.

**What you going to do? *Will you staying here?*

They also sometimes use infinitives as auxiliaries instead of *-ing* forms and vice versa.

**The family is go get into the car. *It'll getting colder this evening.*

They may also add unnecessary auxiliaries.

**With music on the Internet, we will don't need to buy CDs any more.*

Infinitives

Learners may also be unsure when to use a bare or full infinitive.

**I shall to see her again next week.*

Word order

Word order can also cause problems, particularly in question forms.

**When you will come back?*

**Why you won't come with me?*

Consolidation exercises

Form and meaning

Match each of the italic future forms used in the texts with an appropriate rule of thumb from the list below.

- (i) From a programme accompanying a series of concerts:
I hope you *will enjoy* this year's season as much as the last.
- (ii) From a political biography:
I believe that the Conservative government of the 1980s *will be seen* by future historians as the most successful British government of the 20th century.
- (iii) From a programme accompanying a series of concerts:
Ivor Bolton *brings* the St James's Players from St James's, Piccadilly.
- (iv) From a local newspaper:
A lighthouse built over two centuries ago to guide ships into the Mersey *is to enjoy* a new lease of life as a tourist attraction.
- (v) From an advertisement for a concert of classical piano music:
Renowned as a world authority on the music of Liszt, Leslie Howard is recording Liszt's entire piano works. This project *will have taken* fifteen years to complete and amount to some eighty Hyperion compact discs.
- (vi) A teacher talking to a visitor to his class:
T: Well, at the moment they're writing scripted dialogues that *they're going to use* later for a role-play.
V: And what roles *are they going to play*?
T: Well, they're *all going to play* imaginary roles ... well, it looks like they're finished so I'll just *go back* over to them ...

- a an unplanned future event (decision taken at the time of speaking)
- b an inevitable event 'determined' by someone
- c a planned event (decision already taken – 'premeditated intention')
- d something we see as finishing before a point in the future
- e a prediction or assertion not based on present or past evidence
- f something which is part of a fixed programme of planned public events

Differences in meaning

Comment on the difference in meaning between the following.

When will we arrive?

When shall we arrive?

Language in context

- 1 The first text that follows is a transcript of someone talking about his forthcoming weekend away with two friends. Two of the three men are interested in football. The second text is from a newspaper. The journalist ironically considers proposals that in the future we should retire at a much later age than at present. Read the texts that follow, examine the ways in which future time is expressed in them and answer the questions.

A: Next week you're *going* (1) away, aren't you?

B: Well, three of us *are going* (2) up to the Lake District for six days' freedom ... there'll *be* (3) no restrictions on the time that we *do* (4) things, how much we eat and drink. We'll *be leaving* (5) some time on Saturday afternoon and, I guess, getting to the Lake District about 8 or 9 o'clock at night. Two of us *will want* (6) to listen to the outcome of Saturday's football matches, and one of us won't. So that'll *be* (7) an interesting dynamic. It's the first time the three of us have been away together.

We *may be* (8) lonely, miserable, and scavenging in skips for the crumbs from some young man's table, but we *will not be* (9) bored. We *won't be* (10) bored because we'll *be working* (11). The answer to the question posed by the Beatles all those years ago – will you still need me, *will you still feed* (12) me – is respectively 'yes' and 'no'. Yes, we (the young) need you to pay our pen-

sions. And no, we *won't feed* (13) you just yet. Sixty four? A mere stripling! According to Lord Turner, the Government's pensions supremo, we'll soon *need* (14) to work until *we're* (15) 70. And that, of course, is not for a nice, index-linked pension, but for the stately sum of £97.50 a week.

Quite who *is going to employ* (16) us remains, at this stage, vague.

- a Name the forms which have been highlighted.
 - b Speculate as to why these choices have been made. (Refer to the context in which these forms are used and consider the full range of factors that influence our choice of future tenses.)
 - c Consider what alternative forms might have been used and in what ways this might have affected meaning or emphasis.
- 2 The first text that follows is a transcription of a boy (A) and his mother (B) telling a visitor their plans for the following weekend. A is going away with his father (C). B is going away with her other son (D) and a friend (E). In the second text a nine-year-old child is talking about his future. Some of the verbs have been written in their infinitive form. In each case:
- a Use the context to help you guess what future form was originally used.
 - b What alternatives to this might be possible?
 - c How might choosing between different possible alternatives influence meaning and emphasis?

A: We *go* (1) camping. We *go* (2) on the River Thames.

B: Friday *be* (3) spent getting A and C ready to go off, and then on Saturday D and I *go* (4) down to Wokingham on the train for the weekend, which *be* (5) very exciting. And I'm sure E *have* (6) some plans in mind. I expect we *do* (7) some exploring, and I know that E and I *talk* (8) a bit about these Open University courses.

I'm not *get* (9) married. I *live* (10) in Manchester, Leeds or Blackburn. I *be* (11) a policeman, a life-saver or a fireman. Or I *be* (12) a star football player.

Answers to consolidation exercises

Form and meaning

(i) e (ii) e (iii) f (iv) b (v) d (vi) c, c, c, a

Differences in meaning

When will we arrive? is a factual enquiry about the time. *When shall we arrive?* is asking for a suggestion.

Language in context

1	a	b	c
(1)	present continuous	This is an enquiry about arrangements or plans.	Other tenses could be used; for example, if the questioner thought of the holiday as determined by someone else he might ask <i>you're to go away, aren't you?</i> , or if he thought of it as being 'as a matter of course': <i>you'll be going away, won't you?</i>
(2)	present continuous	This is an arranged future.	
(3)	<i>will</i>	This might be a prediction not based on present or past evidence. Alternatively, the speaker may simply be avoiding repetition of <i>going</i> .	He could also use <i>going to</i> . This absence of restrictions is probably something he has already thought about, if not planned.
(4)	present simple	The expression <i>on the time that</i> functions like a time conjunction, after which we use present tenses to refer to the future.	
(5)	continuous form of <i>will</i> (<i>will be ... -ing</i>)	The rule of thumb we'd use to explain this would be future 'as a matter of course'.	He might have used the present continuous or <i>going to</i> . In this case he he might be thinking of the departure time more as an arrangement or a plan.
(6) & (7)	<i>will</i>	These predictions appear to be based on present or past evidence (knowledge of personalities and interests in the group) – the speaker may be avoiding repetition of <i>going to</i> .	He could also use <i>going to</i> – although we generally avoid repeating this so frequently.

	a	b	c
(8)	modal verb	<i>may</i> suggests possibility rather than certainty and can refer to the present or the future. The discussion in this article is clearly about the future.	
(9)	<i>will (not)</i>	This prediction seems to be based on evidence, and learners might expect <i>going to</i> here. However the relatively formal style of the article may explain why <i>will</i> is used here. The fact that the uncontracted <i>will not</i> is used (as opposed to <i>won't</i> later in the article), may suggest an element of avowal or affirmation. Alternatively, this may be a case where the meaning is similar to future continuous uses, but the form is simple because the verb is <i>be</i> .	<i>(not) going to</i> could also be used.
(10)	<i>will (not)</i>	See above (9). This more common, contracted form of <i>will not</i> makes the repetition seem more 'matter of fact' than the first, uncontracted, use.	
(11)	future continuous	The rule of thumb we'd use to explain this would probably be future 'as a matter of course'.	<i>going to</i> could replace <i>will</i> .
(12)	<i>will</i>	If this wasn't part of a song, we might speculate that (this repeated) <i>will</i> is used rather than <i>going to</i> to shed any possible suggestion of intention. However, within a song, choices also depend on rhythm and sound patterns.	<i>going to</i> could replace <i>will</i> .
(13)	<i>will (not)</i>	The reasons this is used rather than <i>(not) going to</i> are probably more to do with style than meaning.	<i>going to</i> would be appropriate here as this seems to be a premeditated intention.
(14)	<i>will</i>	As above (13).	<i>going to</i> would be appropriate here as the prediction seems to be based on present evidence.
(15)	present simple	This is used because, although the meaning is clearly future, it follows the time conjunction <i>until</i> .	
(16)	<i>going to</i>	This is strange as we might expect <i>will</i> here since there is little suggestion of premeditation or present evidence. The choice is perhaps made in order to heighten the contrast implied in the change of paragraph.	<i>will</i> would also be appropriate here.

2

	a	b	c
(1) & (2)	<i>'re going</i>	<i>'re going to go</i>	This makes it less certain that arrangements have been made. Also, many people avoid this expression.
(3)	<i>will be</i>	<i>is going to be</i>	Although this may already be planned, the speaker probably chooses <i>will</i> rather than <i>going to</i> because <i>going to</i> would make the form of this passive construction more complex and more awkward.
(4)	<i>are going</i>	<i>will go, will be going, present simple</i>	This clearly seems to be something that has been arranged or at least planned. However, the other tenses could be used without making much difference since the context already makes this clear. The simple present has some suggestion that this is an inevitable, programmed fact.
(5)	<i>will be</i>	<i>going to</i>	It is already clear that this is a planned event, and so the speaker doesn't depend on choosing <i>going to</i> to make this clear. Also, the verb occurs in a subordinate clause, where we tend to use <i>will</i> rather than <i>going to</i> .
(6)	<i>will have</i>	<i>going to</i>	As above (5).
(7)	<i>'ll do</i>	<i>going to</i>	As above (5).
(8)	<i>are going to talk</i>	<i>will</i>	Perhaps she chooses <i>going to</i> here for variety (the three previous verbs all use <i>will</i> or <i>'ll</i>).
(9) (10) (11) (12)	<i>going to get</i> <i>going to live</i> <i>going to be</i> <i>going to be</i>	We would normally expect more variety of tense (in particular the use of <i>will</i> as well as <i>going to</i>), and this would make no difference to meaning. The speaker is a nine-year-old boy, and this repetition of <i>going to</i> is a characteristic of children's speech.	

15 The past

*loved didn't dream
Did you go? was waiting
had been supposing
had lived*

Key considerations

Learners often have difficulty mastering the forms of the past simple. In particular, they often need opportunities to study and practise:

- question and negative forms.
- irregular past tense forms.
- the spelling of regular past tense forms.

We generally teach learners to choose between different past tenses according to when the events take place in relation to some fixed time or event in the past. We also sometimes focus on the narrative functions of the past perfect simple and the past continuous, and some learners find this is easier to understand and use as a rule of thumb. Narratives also provide a valuable opportunity for learners to practise these tenses.

When our students are studying a tense for the first time, we usually focus on what makes this tense different from others. We want to help our learners make confident choices, and so we often teach rules of thumb which suggest that in any context there is one correct – or at least ‘best’ – choice, even though there are sometimes two equal possibilities.

Many other European languages have tense which is similar to the past perfect simple in form and which is used in similar circumstances. Speakers of these languages generally find it easy to understand and use this tense.

Past simple

The past simple tense is sometimes called the ‘simple past’.

Form

Verbs other than *to be*

	Question word	<i>did</i>	Subject	<i>did not or didn't</i>	Past tense form	Base form
Affirmative			<i>He They</i>		<i>waited. spoke.</i>	
Question	<i>(When)</i>	<i>did</i>	<i>you</i>			<i>ring?</i>
Negative			<i>I</i>	<i>didn't</i>		<i>understand.</i>

tense and aspect'
pp 138–9

verb forms
pp 112–15

To be

To be is different from all other verbs in having two forms of the past simple:

I/She/He/It was.

We/You/They were.

It is also different from other non-modal verbs in forming questions and negatives without *did*.

	Question word	Subject	was/ were	not or 'nt	Subject	Complement
Affirmative		<i>The train</i>	<i>was</i>			<i>late.</i>
Question	<i>Where</i>		<i>were</i>		<i>the knives?</i>	
Negative		<i>We</i>		<i>weren't</i>		<i>alone.</i>

When do we use the past simple?**Finished periods of time**

The past simple is one of the tenses we use to refer to completed events, states or actions. We choose the past simple when we consider that the event, state or action took place within a finished period of time.

We often use an expression such as *last week*, *at the weekend*, *in 1972*, *3 years ago*, or *when we were on holiday* to make it clear that the period of time is finished. Sometimes, however, this completed period of time is only implied.

Shakespeare wrote over 30 plays. (i.e. during his life. We know that he's dead.)

Did you go to the party? (on Saturday)

Sometimes the 'finished period of time' is not only implied, it is also entirely subjective. The following example appears to contradict the rule about finished periods of time as *today* by definition is unfinished. However, the speaker thinks of 'today' (perhaps the working day) as over.

I saw Harry in the office today.

Precise detail

We also use the past simple when we provide precise circumstantial detail about an event (e.g. we can say *I've had my appendix out* but we have to use the past simple as soon as we specify, for example, where or how – we don't say **I've had my appendix out in Warsaw* but *I had my appendix out in Warsaw*). Newspaper reports often introduce a description of an event using the present perfect simple but then 'drift' into the past simple as more detail accumulates.

Time anchor

In telling stories and describing what happened in the past we use the past simple as a ‘time anchor’ – to establish the key ‘time frame’ of events. We also use the past simple to describe the key events that move the story forward. We use other tenses (notably the past perfect and past continuous) to show the relationship of other events to this ‘time frame.’ In the early stages of teaching past tenses, teachers often focus exclusively on the use of the past simple for events within a finished period of time, leaving its use in narrative until later.

Different kinds of events

Some languages use different tenses for different kinds of past events (e.g. ‘momentary’ as opposed to ‘extended over a period of time’ or ‘repeated’). In English we can use the past simple for many kinds of event.

The following paragraph is taken from an article about the French film director Jean Renoir, who died in 1979.

Renoir’s richest period, when he *made* (1) his most imperishable films, was in the 1930s and *ended* (2) abruptly with the Second World War, most of which he *spent* (3) in Hollywood making movies for 20th Century Fox.

- (1) things which are repeated over a period of time
- (2) single, momentary events
- (3) things which are extended over a period of time

Past perfect simple

Form

We form the past perfect simple with *had* followed by the main verb in a past participle form.

	Question word	<i>had</i>	Subject	<i>had</i>	<i>not or 'nt</i>	Past participle
Affirmative			<i>Everyone</i>	<i>had</i>		<i>spoken.</i>
Question	<i>(Why)</i>	<i>had</i>	<i>they</i>			<i>left?</i>
Negative			<i>They</i>		<i>hadn't</i>	<i>eaten.</i>

When do we use the past perfect simple?

Sequence of events

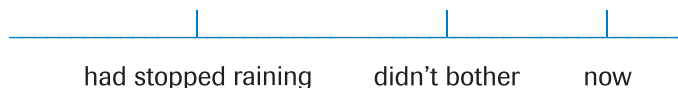
We use the past perfect simple when we want to draw attention to the fact that something took place and finished before something else in the past.



We often use the past perfect simple in clauses connected by a conjunction (e.g. *when, and, that, because, so*) to a clause containing a verb in the past simple.

*I knew (that) I **had seen** her somewhere before.*

*It **had stopped** raining so they didn't bother to put the car away.*



We use the past perfect simple to avoid confusion or ambiguity. We don't use it simply because one event came before another, but in order to clarify the order of events. So, for example, we use the tense more frequently with the conjunction *when* than *before* or *after*:

*They **had finished** eating when I got there.* (Only the two tenses make the sequence of events clear.)

*They **finished** eating before I got there.* (The conjunction *before* makes the sequence of events clear, and so we can use the past simple, rather than the past perfect, for the earlier of the events.)

Very often, context provides some information about the sequence of events. In this case choosing between past simple and past perfect involves making subtle judgements about how much information is needed, and we generally prefer to provide too much rather than to risk misunderstanding.

State verbs

With certain verbs we use the past perfect simple in contexts where learners might expect to use the past perfect continuous.

*I **had understood** that she was dissatisfied for a long time before she said anything.*

Narrative

When we tell a story or describe a sequence of events we generally use the past simple to establish the main facts and to move the story forward if we describe events in the order they happened.

We use the past perfect to describe the background – to introduce the events that happened before the main narrative and have some bearing on it. We often also use it for ‘flashbacks’ to show that a character is recollecting something that happened previously.

The following is the beginning of a chapter in a novel. The novel describes an imaginary republican take-over in Britain, in which the Royal Family are forced to



move from Buckingham Palace to a council housing estate. They are given houses in a street called Hellebore Close. The text below explores the use of tenses in this passage.

The street sign at the entrance to the Close had lost five black metal letters. HELL ... CLOSE it now said, illuminated by the light of a flickering street lamp.

The Queen thought, 'Yes, it is Hell, it must be, because I've never seen anything like it in the whole of my waking life.'

She had visited many council estates – had opened community centres, had driven through the bunting and the cheering crowds, alighted from the car, walked on red carpets, been given a red posy by a two-year-old in a 'Mothercare' party frock, been greeted by tonguetied dignitaries, pulled a cord, revealed a plaque, signed the visitor's book.

The past perfect (*had lost*) is used in the first sentence to set the scene, to establish something which happened before the key event, and which had some bearing on the key event. By beginning with this scene-setting the author also establishes a sense of expectation.

The second sentence of the first paragraph and the whole second paragraph establish (implicitly) the main point of reference in this narrative, i.e. the 'key event', the arrival of the Queen.

The past perfect (*had visited, had opened, etc.*) is used in the third paragraph to establish that the events described are again further in the past. The auxiliary verb *had* is used three times in the list of events and then left out before the other past participles (*alighted etc.*) since it is clear that these events are all in this past perfect sequence.

Past continuous

Form

We form the past continuous with *was* or *were* followed by the main verb in an *-ing* form.

	Question word	was/ were	Subject	was/ were	not or 'nt	-ing form
Affirmative			<i>They</i>	<i>were</i>		<i>dancing.</i>
Question	<i>(Why)</i>	<i>was</i>	<i>she</i>			<i>talking?</i>
Negative			<i>I</i>	<i>wasn't</i>		<i>concentrating.</i>

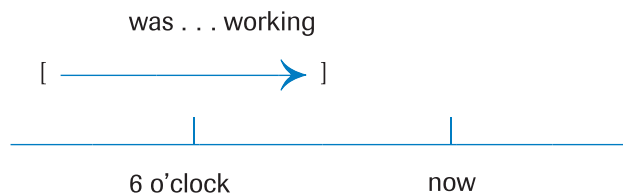
When do we use the past continuous?

Sequence of events

We use the past continuous to describe something which began before a particular point in the past and is still in progress at that point. The action may continue after that point.

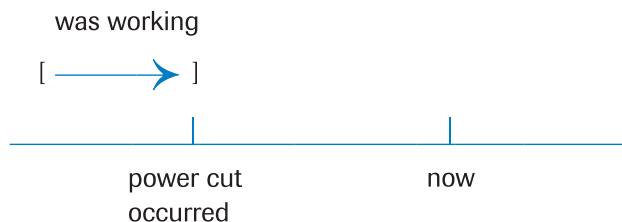
*I **was still working** at 6 o'clock. (and I continued working after that point)*

*He **was using** the vacuum cleaner and so he just didn't hear the doorbell. (and continued using the vacuum cleaner after the doorbell rang)*



We can also use the past continuous when the action stopped at the key point in the past.

*He **was working** at his computer when the power cut occurred.*

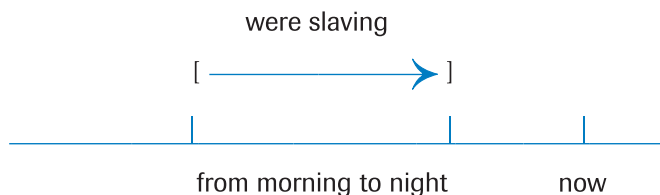


This use is sometimes called the 'interrupted past continuous'. We use the past simple to describe the action which 'interrupted' the past continuous action.

'Complete' periods of time

We sometimes use the past continuous to describe events that extend across 'complete' periods of time (e.g. *all day, the whole lesson, every minute of the journey*).

*We **were slaving** away from morning to night.*



This choice of the past continuous rather than the past simple emphasises that the activity was happening at every moment during the specified period.

Narrative

In narrative, the past continuous is often used to set the scene for events which are taking place. In the following extracts from a novel the author uses the past continuous to establish the background against which the key events happen.

*Mona **was washing** dishes with a vengeance when Mrs Madrigal walked into the kitchen.*

*Mona **was beginning** her second half litre of wine when Mrs Madrigal arrived at the Savoy-Tivoli.*

Habitual action

We sometimes use the past continuous together with an adverb of frequency to emphasise the repetitiveness of an action. This use appears to contradict the more common reasons for choosing this tense.

*He **was always complaining** he didn't earn enough.*

This is similar to the present continuous.

Past perfect continuous

Form

We form the past perfect continuous with *had* followed by *been* and the main verb in an *-ing* form.

	Question word	had/'d	Subject	had/'d	not or 'nt	been + -ing form	
Affirmative			<i>They</i>	<i>had</i>		<i>been losing</i>	<i>a lot of money.</i>
Question	<i>What</i>	<i>had</i>	<i>you</i>			<i>been doing?</i>	
Negative			<i>I</i>		<i>hadn't</i>	<i>been working</i>	<i>for long.</i>

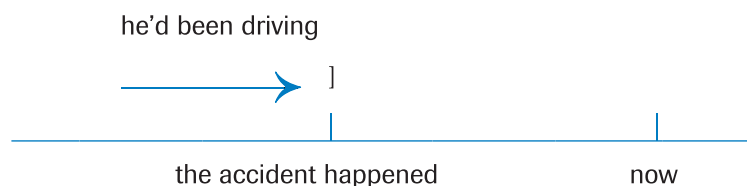
When do we use the past perfect continuous?

Sequence of events

We use the past perfect continuous when we are concerned with an extended or repeated event or activity which took place before a particular point in the past.

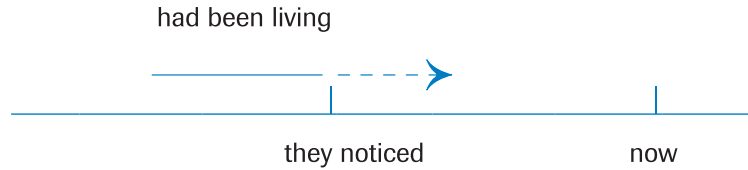
Sometimes this event or activity stops at the specified point of time.

*He'd **been driving** on the motorway without a break for several hours when the accident happened.*



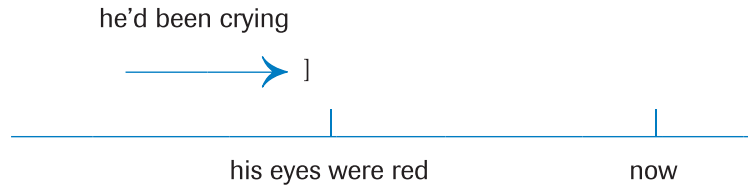
Sometimes this event or activity continues beyond the specified point of time.

*The family **had been living** in the house for years before they noticed the bulge in the wall.*



Sometimes this event or activity has recently finished before the specified point of time.

His eyes were red. I could tell he'd been crying.



As in the first two examples above, we often use the past perfect continuous with *for* or *since* to measure how long something lasted until a particular point.

Comparing 'new' and familiar tenses

Some learners find it helpful to compare the tenses they learn with similar tenses that they already know.

The 'new' tense	A familiar tense
<p>Past continuous</p> <p>[-----]</p> <p>Key point in the past now</p>	<p>Present continuous</p> <p>[-----]</p> <p>now</p>
<p>Past perfect simple</p> <p>X</p> <p>Key point in the past now</p>	<p>Present perfect simple</p> <p>X</p> <p>now</p>
<p>Past perfect continuous</p> <p>→]</p> <p>Key point in the past now</p>	<p>Present perfect continuous</p> <p>→]</p> <p>now</p>

Choosing between tenses

Crucial choices

Choosing between past continuous or past perfect continuous forms can make a particularly crucial difference to the meaning we express. In the first of the examples below the speaker's mother is still living in the house at the time of the visit. In the second example we understand that she is now living somewhere else.

*We called at the house where my mother **was living** and left some flowers for her there.*

*We called at the house where my mother **had been living** to see if the new people had received any mail for her.*

Open choice

Sometimes it is possible to choose more than one tense, and this choice makes no perceptible difference to meaning. In the following examples, each author chooses a different tense. We can only speculate about whether the authors wanted to achieve particular effects of style or emphasis through their respective choice, or whether their choice was unconscious or arbitrary. What is clear is that either tense is possible in either context.

Past continuous or past perfect continuous?

Past continuous:

*Auntie Du and the servants all laughed loudly, recounting at least ten times where they **were sitting** or **standing** when the sirens came.*

Past perfect continuous:

*The voices he could hear were ... simply the indignant residents of the neighbourhood who **had been cooking** or **watching** television or **reading** when the lights went out.*

Past simple or past perfect simple?

*Two days after he **had returned** from Germany, Britten **began** to compose a new song-cycle for Pears, with piano accompaniment.*

*Two days after he **returned** (past simple) is also possible here as the order of events is completely clear.*

Past perfect simple or continuous?

*I **had hoped** to catch an early-morning bus to Stonehenge with a view to proceeding on to Avebury for the afternoon, but this, I **apprehended**, was an impossibility.*

I had been hoping (past perfect continuous) is also possible here. However, the context makes it clear that the writer continued hoping up until a particular moment (*I apprehended*), and so it isn't necessary to convey this in the grammar.

Typical difficulties for learners

Comprehension

Learners may have some problems in understanding the differences between these tenses, but these rarely lead to serious misunderstanding since the distinctions are often unimportant and already clear in the context.

The greatest source of potential misunderstanding is in sentences like these:

He left when I got there/He'd left when I got there.

I knew he liked me/I knew he'd liked me.

Here, the learner has to:

- recognise the significance of the tense choice (simultaneous events or in sequence).
- hear the (barely perceptible) difference between *he left/liked* and *he'd left/liked*.

Native speakers are often unsure whether they've heard the past simple or past perfect, and may ask a question to check this.

Speaking and writing

Regular and irregular forms

There are several reasons why learners may make mistakes in the use of regular and irregular forms. They may:

- (consciously or unconsciously) have learned the wrong form of a particular verb.
- be guessing the form because they don't know what it is.
- over-generalise rules (for example, ignoring irregular forms or using past forms in questions or infinitives).

These reasons are often not immediately clear, and we need to talk to the students about particular mistakes in order to learn the precise causes. Typical examples are:

**I've speaked about it.*

**Did you wrote to him yesterday?*

**I dranked two glasses.*

**Do you ate everything?*

Simplifying the form

Learners may use a bare infinitive instead of the *-ing* form or instead of the past participle.

**I was do my homework when he came to see me last night.*

**I didn't believe that I had pass my examinations.*

Or, they may leave out an auxiliary verb.

**I trying to open the carriage door when the train started.*

**The army had preparing for the attack.*

Or, in asking questions, they may fail to make necessary changes to the order of words. This is particularly common if the question contains a question word (*what, when, why, etc.*) or a negative form. The following example contains both these features.

**Why he hadn't been living there?*

Having learned the use of *did* and *didn't* to ask questions and make negative statements in the past simple, learners may inappropriately extend this to other tenses.

**The survivors didn't had eaten anything for days when they were finally rescued.*

Avoidance

Learners often avoid what they feel they don't properly know yet. Particularly in speaking, learners may play safe by avoiding the more complex past tenses. For example, they may use the past simple to make any reference to past time.

**Yesterday I got up early because I went to the antiques market. When I got to the market it already opened.*

Mistakes like this may also be the result of not knowing the appropriate forms, or may be due to 'forgetting' them under the pressure of communicating.

Some learners consistently use a present tense instead of the past.

**Last Sunday is my birthday.*

Over-use

They may also over-use a form because they have learned a rule which is incomplete or inaccurate. This learner seems to have grasped that we use the past perfect simple for actions that are further back in the past, but isn't yet aware of the other factors which make us choose this tense.

**I had graduated from university and then I had joined the army. I started working several years later.*

Misuse

In the following example, it is difficult to know whether the learner is avoiding the past perfect continuous or is making a 'slip' in the process of composing the sentence. Mistakes like this are particularly common when learners use phrases with *for* and *since*. This may be because they have previously made an effort to associate *for* and *since* with present perfect rather than present simple or continuous forms.

**She has been living in England for a long time but she still didn't speak English.*

Pronunciation

Many learners 'over-pronounce' the regular past tense ending, adding an entire syllable to the base form of the verb, rather than simply adding a final consonant.

<i>loved:</i>	<i>*/lʌved/</i>	<i>picked:</i>	<i>*/pɪked/</i>	<i>dropped:</i>	<i>*/drɒped/</i>
	<i>*/lʌvɪd/</i>		<i>*/pɪkɪd/</i>		<i>*/drɒpɪd/</i>

This may be:

- because they find the combination of consonants difficult to pronounce without a vowel to separate them.
- because they haven't learned the appropriate pronunciation rules.
- because they are influenced by adjectives they know like *wicked* (*/wɪkɪd/*).

Consolidation exercises

Differences in meaning

Explain the differences in meaning between the sentences in these groups:

- (i) I left when he arrived.
- (ii) I had left when he arrived.
- (iii) I was leaving when he arrived.
- (iv) She pointed out he spoke English.
- (v) She pointed out he had spoken English.
- (vi) She pointed out he was speaking English.
- (vii) She'd been painting the room when she was taken into hospital.
- (viii) She'd painted the room when she was taken into hospital.
- (ix) She was painting the room when she was taken into hospital.

Learners' English

The following were written by learners of English.

- (i) I travelled in a coach to Ankara. A car on the outside lost control and pushed us off the road.
- (ii) I had got up and then I had washed. Then I had put on my clothes and I left home.
- (iii) We used to stay with friends in Kabul for two years when we came to Britain and got asylum.
- (iv) Her grandmother was died four years ago.

- a What is strange (or wrong) about the use or form of tenses in each extract?
- b Why do you think the learners may have expressed themselves in this way?
- c What general rule of thumb would you want to give to each learner?

Language in context

1 Read the following extracts, in which some of the verbs have been printed in italics. Answer the questions about the verbs.

- (i) This is from a newspaper article about the ending of Prohibition (the banning of alcoholic drinks) in the United States.

It was the end of a startling social experiment which *had begun* (1) at midnight on January 17, 1920 – when constitutional prohibition *made* (2) America 'dry'.

But less than two years later, the experiment *had* patently *failed* (3) and Americans were busy paralysing, blinding and killing themselves with huge quantities of bootleg (i.e. illegal) liquor.

Gangsters *were making* (4) millions from the licensing trade and the most inoffensive citizen regularly *defied* (5) the law in order to get a little of what he fancied.

(ii) From a TV programme about the war poet, Siegfried Sassoon:

He was one of the people whom the war rescued in the sense that it gave his life meaning. He *had been dreaming* (6) in the garden at home, writing poems, having them privately printed, and it *had been* (7) a very drifting, purposeless kind of life. It didn't satisfy him and he didn't know what to do about it.

(iii) In this extract from a novel, a woman wakes up after dreaming about her husband, who is a doctor.

She woke up still squinting against the sunlight that *had flashed* (8) off his glasses. He *had been wearing* (9) a stethoscope, she recalled, looped across the back of his neck like a shaving towel. He *hadn't worn* (10) a stethoscope since the first week he came to work for her father. It was a new-young-doctor thing to do, really.

(iv) From a newspaper article about John McCarthy, a political hostage:

John McCarthy *was working* (11) as a journalist in Beirut when he was seized on his way to the airport to leave.

- a What is the tense?
- b What reasons are there for choosing this tense in this context?
- c What other tense(s) might also be possible here? How might these affect meaning?

2 Read the following extracts, in which some of the verbs are provided only in their infinitive form. Study these and consider the questions below.

(i) From an interview with a popular British entertainer:

My most memorable Christmas has to be 1970, when my eldest son, Robert, was 6 months old and I *play* (1) Aladdin in panto at the London Palladium. *We wake* (2) up on Christmas Day to find it *snow* (3) during the night. In the middle of the lawn was a single rose, which my husband Bobby *put* (4) there. The day was perfect from then on.

(ii) From a novel:

I met this same man Lin for the first time twenty years later, when I already *live* (5) in the United States for five years.

(iii) From a novel:

... it was Drosoula who died first, perfectly upright in her rocking chair, so quietly that it seemed she *apologise* (6) for having lived at all. She was an indomitable woman who *live* (7) a few short years of happiness with a husband that she *love* (8), a woman who *disown* (9) her own son as a matter of principle, and lived out her days in ungrudging service to those who had adopted her by apparent accident, even earning them their daily bread.

- a What tense do you think was used in the original text?
- b Might any other tense form be acceptable in the same context? What difference (if any) might this make to the meaning?

Answers to consolidation exercises

Differences in meaning

In (i) the two events are practically simultaneous whereas in (ii) the departure took place before the arrival (I was no longer there). In (iii) the arrival occurred during the act of leaving (e.g. I might have been locking doors or saying *goodbye*).

In (iv) his speaking English was a fact at the time she pointed it out whereas (v) refers to a previous occasion on which he spoke English or possibly to the fact that he used to speak English. In (vi) the pointing out took place during the time of speaking.

In (vii) we understand that she had recently stopped painting the room, but not that she had necessarily finished the work. In (viii) we understand that the job of painting the room was completed. In (ix) we understand that the task of painting the room was begun but not finished. In some contexts we could choose between (vii) and (ix) without significantly affecting the meaning.

Learners' English

- (i)
 - a Since the second event (the car losing control) happened at some point during the journey, the past continuous (*was travelling*) is appropriate here.
 - b Learners sometimes over-use the past simple as part of a natural tendency to simplify the tense system. Alternatively, the learner may simply not have learned this use of the past continuous.
 - c 'Use the past continuous for an action which is in progress when something else happens to interrupt it.'
- (ii)
 - a The past simple and not the past perfect is appropriate in this chronological sequence of events.
 - b It is likely that this learner has learned or has internalised the rule that the past perfect is used for actions previous to other actions in the past, but that she has not understood that it is used to clarify the sequence of events.
 - c 'Use the past perfect when this helps to make the sequence of events clear.'
- (iii)
 - a The sentence doesn't make sense. *We had been staying in Kabul* is what, in fact, the learner meant.
 - b The learner appears not to know the use of the past perfect continuous.

- c 'Use the past perfect continuous when you describe something that took place over a period of time and then stopped before or at a specified point in the past, especially if you also use the conjunction *when*.'
- (iv) a The verb should simply be *died*.
- b The learner may have problems in choosing and constructing past tenses, and may consistently construct forms like this (e.g. **was lived, *was ate*). She may be influenced by coming across (but not understanding) passive constructions which resemble this (e.g. *was killed*) She may also be confused by the similarity between *died* and the adjective *dead* (e.g. *was dead*).
 - c 'Never use forms of *be* followed by a past simple verb'.

Language in context

- 1 (1) a past perfect simple
- b The verb refers to an event two years before the key event – the end of Prohibition.
 - c To some extent the meanings of words (*end/begin*) make the sequence of events clear, and so the past simple could be used. The past perfect makes the sequence still clearer, however.
- (2) a past simple
- b The previous verb (*had begun*) has established the time sequence.
 - c The past perfect could also be used, but this would only repeat a distinction which has already been made.
- (3) a past perfect simple
- b This shows that the failure took place before the time that is specified (*less than two years later*).
 - c The past simple could not be used here since the past perfect simple is only the tense which makes the sequence of events clear.
- (4) a past continuous
- b The gangsters were making their millions before the key time reference (the failure of Prohibition) and were continuing to do this at and perhaps after that time.
 - c The past simple could be used here, but this would be a bald, factual statement – we would lose the sense of 'this was happening at around that particular time'. The past perfect would change the meaning, suggesting that they were no longer making money at the time of the failure of Prohibition.
- (5) a past simple
- b This describes a fact that was true at that time.
 - c The past continuous could also be used, but this would emphasise that the defiance was happening before and after the key time reference (the failure of Prohibition), making it seem more temporary.
- (6) a past perfect continuous
- b This describes an extended event that continued until (more or less) the war began.
 - c No other tense would make the sequence of events clear in the same way.
- (7) a past perfect simple
- b The meaning of this in terms of time is the same as (6) above. However, the verb here is *be*, which we don't use in continuous tenses.
 - c The past simple (*was*) would also be possible here as the previous verb has established the relevant time period (before the war) and there would be no risk of ambiguity.

- (8) **a** past perfect simple
b This makes it clear that the event is prior to waking up, i.e. part of her dream.
c No other tense would make the sequence of events clear in the same way.
- (9) **a** past perfect continuous
b Unlike (8) above, which describes something momentary, this is extended over a longer period of time.
c The past perfect simple might be possible here if the author didn't wish to make a contrast with (10) below, where the change in tense instantly makes it clear that this is a different event in the past.
- (10) **a** past perfect simple
b This is still previous to the key time reference of the paragraph (her waking up).
c No other tense would make the sequence of events clear in the same way.
- (11) **a** past continuous
b This is a past event that is interrupted by something else happening.
c We might expect the past perfect continuous (*had been working*) to be used here since this appears to be over (he was *on his way to the airport to leave*). Perhaps the past continuous is chosen because (closer to the present) it has more immediacy and lends greater impact to the shock of the seizure.
- 2** (1) **a** past continuous *was playing*
b This shows that the activity began before Christmas and continued after it. Any other tense would alter the meaning.
- (2) **a** past simple *woke*
b This describes an event within a finished period of time (Christmas Day).
- (3) **a** past perfect simple *had snowed*
b This shows that the snowing had finished before the key time reference (waking up). The past perfect continuous could also be used here, and would draw attention more to the duration of the event rather than to the fact of it.
- (4) **a** past perfect simple *had put*
b This shows that this happened before the moment of discovering it. The past simple could also be used, but we would then have to pay a lot of attention to context to work out the sequence of events.
- (5) **a** past perfect continuous *had already been living*
b This describes something that occupied a period of time continuing up to a specified point in the past (their meeting). The past perfect simple (*had already lived*) is also possible as we often use *live* in simple tenses (see p 226).
- (6) **a** past continuous *was apologising*
b The appearance of apologising was in progress at the moment of death.
- (7) **a** past perfect simple *had lived*
b This verb takes us back to an earlier part of her life.
- (8) **a** past perfect simple *had loved*
b This is part of an earlier period in the narrative (before her death). The simple past would also be possible here since the time sequence of events is clear.
- (9) **a** past perfect simple *had disowned*
b As (8) above.

16 The present perfect

*Has he gone?
has spoken have loved
haven't dreamed
has been wearing*

Key considerations

Many learners find it difficult to think of the present perfect as a form that can refer to present time in some contexts, and past time in others. This is a particular problem for speakers of many European languages whose first language has a similar form which is always used to refer to past time. In this chapter we consider its use to refer to present time ('uncompleted actions or events') separately from its use to refer to past time ('completed actions or events'). In teaching it is also generally advisable to deal separately with these uses.

The biggest difficulty for many learners is knowing when to use the present perfect as opposed to the past simple. Choosing between the present perfect simple and continuous can also pose problems. Learners usually welcome:

- clear rules of thumb to help them choose one form or the other (particularly at lower levels).
- opportunities to explore how these tenses are used in real conversations and texts (particularly at higher levels).
- teaching through comparison with closely related tenses.

Learners often find the form of the present perfect relatively straightforward. However, they may still need opportunities to study and practise irregular past participle forms.

Form

Present perfect simple

We form the present perfect simple with *has* ('s) or *have* ('ve) followed by the main verb in a past participle form.

Past participles may be regular (e.g. *lived*) or irregular (e.g. *known*).

⋮
tense and
aspect
pp 138–9

⋮
verb forms
pp 112–15

	Question word	have/ has	Subject	have/ has	not or n't	past participle	
Affirmative			She	has		known	about it for weeks.
			She	has		passed	her test.
Question	(How long) (What)	have have	they you			worked eaten?	here?
Negative		They		haven't		lived	in Shanghai
		She		hasn't			for long.

Present perfect continuous

We form the present perfect continuous with *has* ('s) or *have* ('ve) followed by *been* and an *-ing* form.

	Question word	have/ has	Subject	have/ has	not or n't	been + ing	
Affirmative			She	has		been wearing	glasses
			It	has		been raining.	for years.
Question	(How long)	have	they			been driving?	
Negative		I		haven't		been learning	Thai
		They		haven't		been paying	for long. attention.

Meaning

What unites uses of the present perfect is that they link the past to the present, focusing on the effect or result at the time of speaking or writing. While this may help learners, it is by no means adequate to account for many uses of the tenses; nor is it an adequate guide to choosing which tense to employ.

Whatever their first language, learners usually find it helpful if we deal with uncompleted and completed actions or events separately. If their first language has a tense system, they will be aware that the equivalent to the present perfect in their own language will sometimes be a present tense and at other times will be a past tense.

It is unrealistic to expect learners to make correct choices before they have had extensive exposure to these and closely related tenses, and have explored why one tense rather than another is used in real examples of language use.

Uncompleted actions or events

When do we use the present perfect continuous?

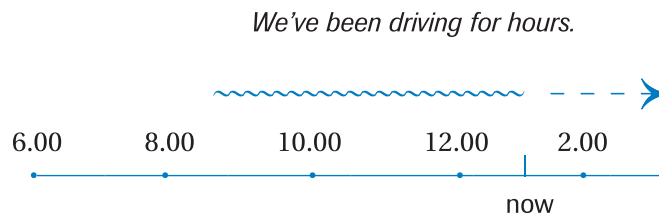
It is helpful to begin with the continuous rather than the simple form because this is the basic form we use.

We use the present perfect continuous when we measure the duration so far of a present action or to specify when it began. We use the present perfect continuous in conjunction with an expression beginning with the preposition *for* or *since*, or with the question *How long ...?*, or when one of these expressions is implied.

We've been driving for hours.

How long have you been trying to contact me?

We can show this use diagrammatically.



Whatever their first language, learners often find this use illogical and instinctively want to use a present tense in place of the present perfect continuous.

When do we use the present perfect simple instead of the present perfect continuous?

Open choice

Like the present perfect continuous, we can use the present perfect simple when we specify the beginning of a present action or when we measure its duration so far. Like the present perfect continuous, we often use the present perfect simple in conjunction with the prepositions *for* and *since* or the question *How long ...?*

In describing general (biographical) facts we can choose either form.

He's smoked/been smoking since he was in the army.

Duration

Sometimes we choose the simple rather than the continuous form to emphasise that something isn't short-term.

Simple: *I've worked here most of my life.* (i.e. long-term)

Continuous: *I've been working here for just a few days.* (i.e. short-term)

Repetition

We can choose the continuous form to stress that something is repeated.

Continuous: *I've **been using** the swimming pool since we moved into the district.* (i.e. repeated)

Simple: *I've **used** the swimming pool since we moved into the district.* (i.e. on one or two occasions)

State verbs

On p 109 there is a list of types of verbs we generally avoid using in the present continuous tense. We also tend to avoid these in the present perfect continuous, particularly those describing existence, mental states and possession.

*I've **known** about the inspection for weeks.* NOT **I've been knowing ...*

However, we are less strict about avoiding these verbs when we use the present perfect continuous, particularly those which describe wants and likes.

*I've **been wanting** to have an opportunity to talk to you for a few days.*

After the (first/second, etc.) time

We use the present perfect simple after this expression when we refer to an event in the present (or the future).

*Is this the first time **she has flown**?*

Summary of differences

The table below summarises these differences between how we use the present perfect continuous and simple to express present meaning.

	Present perfect	
	Continuous	Simple
Expresses duration until now	✓	✓
Frequently used with expressions beginning <i>for ...</i> , <i>since ...</i> or <i>How long ...?</i>	✓	✓
Emphasises that something is short-lived	✓	
Emphasises that something is repeated	✓	
Suggests a limited number of occasions		✓
Not used with state verbs	(✓)	
After <i>the (first, second, etc.) time</i>		✓



Completed actions or events

When do we use the present perfect simple?

Unfinished periods of time

We use the present perfect simple to refer to completed events, states or actions in the past which took place within a period of time which is unfinished. Sometimes we use expressions like *today* or *this year* to specify this unfinished period of time.

*I've had two accidents **this week**.*

Often it is just implied.

I've never been outside Europe. (The period of the person's life is an implied unfinished period of time.)

In American English the past simple may be used in place of the present perfect simple in these instances.

Rules of thumb

Course materials often explain when we use the present perfect simple with one or more rules of thumb. However, we need to be very wary of simplifications such as the following.

We use the present perfect simple:

- for a more recent past than that expressed by the past simple.

This is simply wrong (e.g. *I've lived through two world wars* is clearly not 'more recent' than *I saw him a minute ago*).

- for events which have present relevance or a connection with 'now'.

This is very vague and we can argue that everything we express has present relevance regardless of the tense we choose (why else would we be saying or writing it?). Nonetheless, in examples such as *I've lost my keys!* there is a clear focus on the present state of anxiety. This is perhaps easier to demonstrate visually than to explain to elementary learners.

- with adverbs such as *just, already, yet, ever* and *before*.

It may be very helpful for learners to learn and practise common expressions such as *Have you ever been to ...? Have you ... yet?* and *I've already ...* However, it is misleading to teach these adverbs only or essentially with the present perfect as they can be used with a variety of tenses.

- in contexts such as news reports or personal biographies.

These provide extremely useful sources of material for learners in exploring how the present perfect is used and they offer meaningful opportunities

for practice. Nonetheless, this can also be unhelpful as a rule of thumb; depending on whether a finished period of time is or isn't mentioned or understood, other tenses are used in these contexts.

- to refer to completed events, states or actions 'when no past time is specified.'

This rule of thumb may help some learners to make appropriate choices, but still ignores the key factor (unfinished time period).

We occasionally choose to use the present perfect simple with expressions of finished time (e.g. *I've seen him yesterday*) because, despite the adverb *yesterday*, we feel that the event is within a present time period. However, it would be confusing to draw learners' attention to examples like this.

Past simple contrasted with present perfect simple

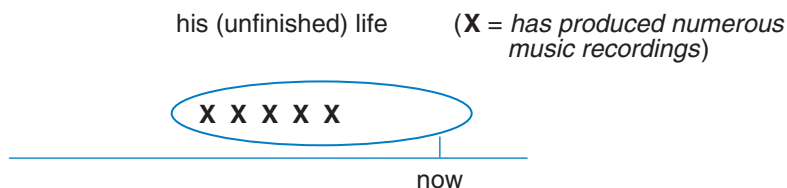
News reports and biographies provide a useful source of material for teachers who want their students to analyse how these two tenses are used. For example, in the short text which follows, the use of the present perfect followed by the past simple makes the distinction clear.

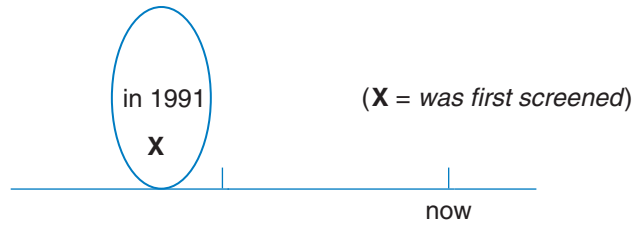
In addition to his published writing, Benjamin Zephaniah *has produced* (1) numerous music recordings, including 'Us and Dem' (1990) and 'Belly of de Beast' (1996), and has also appeared as an actor in several television and film productions, including appearing as Moses in the film 'Farendj' (1990). His first television play, 'Dread Poets Society', *was first screened* (2) by the BBC in 1991.

(1) Present perfect simple: No time is specified – we understand that this is during his life and that he is still alive.

(2) Past simple: This is clearly qualified by *in 1991* – a finished period of time.

We can express this difference diagrammatically.





Some key differences between these two tenses (and their similarity) are summarised in the following chart.

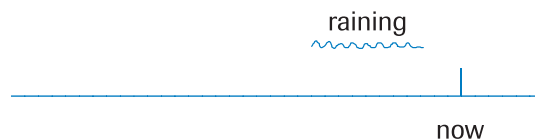
	Past simple	Present perfect simple
Finished events	✓	✓
Events in a finished period of time	✓	
Events in an unfinished period of time		✓
General biographical details about a living person		✓
General biographical details about someone who is dead	✓	
Generally used in telling stories	✓	

When do we use the present perfect continuous?

We use the present perfect continuous to refer to an activity which took place over a period of time and, usually, has recently stopped.

*Your telephone **has been ringing**.* (This continued for some time. It is now silent.)

*It **has been raining**.* (The sky is now clear but the ground is wet.)



The activity may be constant or repeated (e.g. *It has been raining* may describe an extended, single period of rain or a series of short showers).

Present perfect simple and continuous contrasted

The present perfect simple may describe something which has only recently finished, but this is not necessarily the case.

I've read 'Crime and Punishment'. (I read it when I was at school.)

We use the present perfect continuous to describe an activity recently stopped.

I've been reading 'Crime and Punishment'.

The present perfect simple may describe something which is repeated or extended, but this is not necessarily the case.

*Your wife **has rung**.* (She may have rung just once, and only briefly.)

When we use the present perfect continuous, we understand that the event is repeated or extended.

*Your wife **has been ringing**.*

The present perfect simple focuses more on the completed result and the present perfect continuous more on the activity itself. The following may describe the same ‘recently stopped activity’.

*I’ve **painted** the room.* (and so I have a sense of having achieved or accomplished something)

*I’ve **been painting** the room.* (and that’s why I’m covered in paint)

Because of the recentness of events described by the present perfect continuous, we don’t use it to describe general biographical, historical or circumstantial detail.

Summary of key differences between these two tenses to express past meaning.

	Present perfect	
	Continuous	Simple
Finished events	✓	✓
Events located in an unfinished period of time		✓
Events which may be part of general biographical, historical or circumstantial detail		✓
Events which have only very recently finished	✓	(✓)
Events which took place over an extended period of time	✓	(✓)

Typical difficulties for learners

Comprehension

Misunderstanding rarely results from uncertainty about the differences between these tenses, or between these tenses and past tenses. However, the following can cause difficulty.

How long ...?

The expression *how long* includes no explicit reference to time, and learners may fail to understand this question:

How long have you been living here?

We often compress all the syllables before and after *long* in normal, casual speech (/ˌlɒnbɪlɪv'hɪə/), and this can make it even more difficult for learners to understand the question.

Present and present perfect tenses

They may also confuse the meaning of the present perfect and the present tense in questions beginning *How long ...?* or in sentences including a phrase beginning ... *for*.

How long have you been (waiting) here for? How long are you (waiting) here for?
I have been (staying) here for a week. I am (staying) here for a week.

Speaking and writing

It takes a long time and a lot of exposure to English for many learners to be clear when to use the present perfect and when to use the present or past simple. Even when they are clear, they may continue to make mistakes under the pressure to communicate.

Some learners find choosing between the tenses difficult because their own language doesn't make this kind of distinction. Speakers of some European languages may be misled by the fact that their own languages have tenses which are similar in form, but which are used quite differently.

Choosing between present and present perfect

It is very common for learners to use the present simple or continuous instead of the present perfect with *How long ...?*, *for* and *since*.

**I am waiting for you since 6.00. *I stay in London since Saturday.*

Many learners find this use instinctively logical and 'correct', and continue making this kind of mistake long after they have learned the correct rule.

This problem can lead to serious misunderstanding when the present continuous is used with *How long ...?* or *for ...* in place of the present perfect continuous, because the sentences may be structurally correct, but express something the learner doesn't intend. Learners may say the following, meaning 'until now', but people may understand that *two weeks* is the total length of the stay.

We're staying in London for two weeks.

How long ...?

Because the expression *how long* includes no explicit reference to time, learners may adapt it to make it more explicit.

**How long time have you been living here?*

They may also use a present tense in place of the present perfect:

**How long are you living here?*

They may also avoid questions with *How long ...?* altogether, opting for a simpler but less idiomatic form such as *When did you start living here?*

For and since

Learners often confuse these two prepositions.

Many learners are instinctively reluctant to construct sentences which finish with time adverbials beginning *for* or *since*. They often 'invent' introductory phrases to convey the information about time. The following learners have created hybrid structures mixing elements of their respective first languages (French and Chinese) with elements of English grammar.

**It is six years I haven't smoked.* **There's so long we don't see each other.*

The (first/second, etc.) time

Learners may choose a tense that they consider more logical than the normal present perfect.

*(*It is the first time I am travelling by plane.*

Native speakers also vary the tenses after *the first time*, but teachers may choose to treat this as a mistake so that their learners become familiar with the 'standard' form (which some examinations may demand).

Over-use of present perfect forms

Learners may pay so much attention to choosing the present perfect instead of the present when they use expressions beginning with *for*, *since* or *How long ...?*, that they begin to over-associate the present perfect with these expressions and use this tense even when it is not appropriate.

**I have been living there for a long time when the war started.* (instead of *I had been living*)

Mistakes of this kind may go unnoticed when the time (e.g. *when the war started*) is not specified, and this can lead to serious misunderstanding. For example, if a retired person says the following, people will understand that they are still working.

**I have been working as a police inspector for many years.*

Choosing between past simple and present perfect simple

The most noticeable mistakes are often those in which learners use the present perfect simple in place of the past simple.

**Has she been there last year?*

**When I was 9 we have moved to a large house.*

Learners also sometimes use the past simple in place of the present perfect simple. This is generally considered incorrect in British English although it is correct in American English.

*(*I already did it. (*Did you have dinner yet?*

Choosing between past simple and present perfect continuous

Learners may also use the past simple in place of the present perfect continuous, for example using the following to express irritation.

**You drank! (instead of You've been drinking!)*

**I waited for you! (instead of I've been waiting for you!)*

This use of the past simple can conceal or confuse the speaker's intention since the meanings of the two tense forms are significantly different.

Simplification

Under the pressure of on-the-spot communication, learners may leave words out or simplify grammar. For example, they may use the word order of a statement rather than the more complicated word order of a question. This happens frequently in all question forms, particularly after question words (*what, when, etc.*), perhaps because these already show that the sentence is a question. It also happens particularly in negative questions (see the second example below), perhaps because they include so many grammatical elements (tense, question form and negative).

**What you have brought us? *Why you haven't done it?*

Learners whose first language indicates questions only by punctuation or intonation are especially likely to make mistakes like this.

Learners sometimes simplify grammar in affirmative sentences as well as in questions. They may leave out an auxiliary verb in contexts where they should use two together.

**He has living there.*

Regular and irregular forms

Learners need to learn irregular past and past participle forms as items of vocabulary. They may be inclined to use regular forms when they should use irregular ones.

Typical examples are:

**I've speaked about it. *Have they took the rubbish away?*

They may also use present forms instead of past participles.

**The most understanding person I have meet.*

Consolidation exercises

Differences in meaning

Explain the differences in meaning between the sentences in each of the following groups, referring where appropriate to contexts in which one or other might be preferred.

- (i) How long are you staying here? / How long have you been staying here?
- (ii) I've lived here for 60 years. / I've been living here for 60 years.

Language in context

- 1 Read the following text, which provides biographical information about the editor of the published diaries of Kenneth Williams, a popular British entertainer who died in 1988. Some of the verb forms are printed in italics.

Russell Davies, editor of 'The Kenneth Williams Diaries', *became* (1) a freelance writer and broadcaster soon after leaving Cambridge University in 1969. He *has been* (2) a film and television critic of the Observer and television critic of the Sunday Times, and lately *has been writing* (3) a column about sport for the Sunday Telegraph. For television and radio, he *has presented* (4) many literary and political features, a history of radio comedy, more than fifty editions of 'What the Papers Say', sundry jazz documentaries (some of them watched by Kenneth Williams); but in spite of his involvement with Light Entertainment, particularly in radio, he never quite *collided* (5) with Williams himself – except in print.

- a In each case explain the choice of tense. (Make specific reference to the contexts in which they occur.)
 - b Consider whether any other tense might be acceptable in the same context. What difference (if any) might this make to meaning?
- 2 Read the following extracts from various sources. Some of the verbs are provided only in their infinitive form.

From a letter to an author:

We *meet* (1) last year when you *come* (2) to the school to give a talk.

From the beginning of a conversation:

So what *happen* (3) since the last time we *meet* (4) then?

TV presenter talking about eating his favourite evening meal:

The garlic makes it pretty pungent, so the BBC make-up ladies in the mornings can always tell when I *eat* (5) it.

A critic talking about a piece of music played at a piano competition:

I *hear* (6) it twice already yesterday.

Letter sent by author:

I *talk* (7) about the lexical approach in a seminar about three months ago.

- a Study the numbered verbs and consider in each instance which tense was likely to have been used in the original text: past simple, present perfect simple or present perfect continuous.
- b Consider whether any other tense form might be acceptable in the same context. What difference (if any) might this make to meaning?

Learners' English

Study the following sentences, all of which were spoken by learners. Each sentence contains forms that some teachers would consider to be a mistake.

- (i) Shakespeare has written over 30 plays.
- (ii) Hi. Sorry I didn't call you earlier but I just got home.
- (iii) Did you ever go to Ravello in Italy?
- (iv) My bike works now. I've mended it last week.

- a Identify and explain the 'incorrect' forms.
- b Which of these forms might be used by native speakers?
- c A student asks you to 'correct every mistake'. Which of these would you correct?

Answers to consolidation exercises

Differences in meaning

The following answers involve an element of speculation since no context for the sentences is provided. The explanations given are the most likely, but others may also be possible.

- (i) The first sentence refers to a period of time which began in the past and continues into the future. The second refers only to the time 'until now'.

- (ii) Both sentences are correct and in most contexts probably interchangeable. We sometimes choose the continuous form in order to stress temporariness, but this is clearly not the case here (60 years).

Language in context

1 a, b

- (1) Past simple was used because this event took place within a clearly identified, finished period of time (1969 or soon after). No other tense could plausibly be used here.
- (2) Present perfect simple was used because no past time is specified, i.e. these are general facts about his life – an unfinished period of time. The past simple might be used if the writer wanted to ‘distance’ these facts, to suggest that they belonged to a finished period in his life.
- (3) Present perfect continuous was used because this is a repeated activity which has only recently stopped. Present perfect simple or past simple would not make it clear that writing the column was a regular activity. The past simple would also suggest that this activity belonged to a period in Davies’ career which is now over.
- (4) Present perfect simple was used. See (2) above.
- (5) Past simple was used because this event occurred within a clearly identified, finished period of time – Williams’ life. The present perfect could only be used if Williams were still alive.

2 a, b

- (1) Past simple (*met*) was used. No other form is possible here.
- (2) Past simple (*came*) was used. No other form is possible here.
- (3) Present perfect continuous (*has been happening*) was used. The person who asks this question is interested in a string of recent events. The present perfect simple (*what has happened ...?*) would also be possible, but in this case, the speaker would be interested in one or two key, single events, and may be referring to a specific topic that both people recognise.
- (4) Past simple (*met*) was used. No other form is possible here.
- (5) Present perfect continuous (*have been eating*) was used. In choosing this tense, the speaker focuses on the recentness and duration of the event. He might also have chosen the present perfect simple (*have eaten*). Here, the focus would be on the fact of eating garlic rather than on features of time.
- (6) Present perfect simple (*have heard*) was used. The finished time *yesterday* leads us to expect the past simple (*heard*). However, in the original spoken interview the speaker used the present perfect simple, perhaps because despite the specified time, he felt that the event was within a present time frame. Although this example contradicts the rule of thumb we usually give to learners and we would probably never teach it, we need to recognise that such examples are relatively common.
- (7) Present perfect simple (*have talked*) was used. See (6) above.

Learners' English

- a** (i) is the most obviously incorrect sentence since the use of the present perfect implies an unfinished period of time. Shakespeare's life is a finished period of time.
- (ii), (iii) all contain forms that contradict the rule of thumb we give to learners – that we use & (iv) the past simple when the event occurred within a finished period of time. Following explanations given by coursebooks, we would expect:
- (ii) *I haven't called you earlier but I've just got ...*
- (iii) *Have you ever been to ...?*
- (iv) *I mended it ...*
- b** Sentences (i) and (iv) would probably pass unnoticed if spoken outside the language classroom. (ii) and (iii) are standard American English, and would be said by a speaker of any English variety if they were thinking of:
- a particular finished period of time, e.g. a particular holiday or business trip (iii).
 - being back home as a new (and unfinished) phase of the day (ii).
- (iv) might be used if the speaker were thinking of the 'mending' as belonging to the present time.
- c** Teachers would normally correct (i). They would also probably correct (ii), (iii) and (iv) if the learner was struggling to grasp and apply the basic rule of thumb, and this was sure to help. However, such examples are common among native speakers in Britain, and (ii) and (iii) are standard examples of American use.