

Verb phrase 2: tense and aspect

INTRODUCTION

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English verb phrases give information of different kinds. Verb phrases indicate: tense, which gives information about time, e.g. *I speak* (present tense) versus *I spoke* (past tense); aspect, which gives information about the speaker's perspective on time, e.g. *I spoke* (simple aspect) versus *I was speaking* (progressive aspect); voice, whether active (e.g. *She destroyed it*) or passive (e.g. *It was destroyed*), which gives information about agents and recipients of verb processes. This chapter deals with contrasts between the different tenses (present and past), and the different aspects (progressive and perfect). Voice is dealt with in **476–487 The passive**.

Progressive (also known as continuous) aspect is formed with auxiliary verb *be* + the *-ing* participle of a lexical verb. Perfect aspect is formed with auxiliary verb *have* + the *-ed* participle form of a lexical verb.

Although English does not have a future tense, the term 'future' is often used to refer to modal and aspect combinations, such as 'future perfect' (e.g. ***I will have studied for three hours by the time I finish.***) or 'future progressive' (***She will be arriving tomorrow.***).

Tense and aspect are combined in the verb phrase. The tense is shown on the first verb in the verb phrase (unless it is a modal). All subsequent verbs have non-tensed forms (*-ing* participle, *-ed* participle, or infinitive). A verb phrase may include both aspects, progressive and perfect.

Examples of aspect in present and past tense

aspect	present tense	past tense
progressive	Why is he smiling like that?	Why was he smiling like that?
perfect	They have changed the time. (<i>have</i> is present)	They had changed the time. (<i>had</i> is past)
perfect and progressive combined	He has been doing some research.	He had been doing some research.

The perfect auxiliary *have* comes before the progressive auxiliary *be* when the two are combined:

perfect progressive
He | **has** | **been** **working** | on Mrs Green's case for almost six years.
(He is having worked on Mrs Green's case ...)

••• 214b Ordering of elements in complex verb phrases

TENSE

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English verbs can show two tenses, present and past. Examples are given in the table overleaf.

Examples of present and past tenses

verb form	tense
<i>I work here.</i>	present
<i>She is working in London.</i>	present
<i>They have left.</i>	present
<i>We worked all day.</i>	past
<i>I was working in the garden.</i>	past
<i>It had worked well.</i>	past

The marking of tense on irregular verbs often involves internal sound changes (e.g. *sit–sat*, *speak–spoke*).

529 Appendix: Irregular verbs

Present tenses are mostly concerned with talking about present time, and past tenses are mostly concerned with talking about past time.

The present tense forms are also used to talk about other kinds of time, especially the future. Present tense forms can also refer to the past. This is particularly true of narratives, where past events may be recounted partly or wholly in the present tense (for example, jokes are often told entirely in present tense). This is sometimes referred to as the ‘historic present’. Examples of present tense forms with future and past reference are given in the table below.

Examples of present tense forms referring to future and past time

example	tense	time referred to
<i>They are coming to see you next weekend, I gather.</i>	present	future time (529 362)
<i>Her daughter finishes school tomorrow evening.</i>	present	future time (529 369)
<i>And his mum says, ‘Homework never killed anybody,’ and then he said, ‘No, and I’m not going to be the first.’</i>	present	the past (frequently used for dramatising speech reporting in spoken stories, 529 360e)
<i>Emma, this friend of mine, brought out these photographs of the family through the years and he’s looking at them, and he said ‘Oh!’</i>	present	the past (frequently used for dramatising important events in spoken stories, 529 360a)

The past tense forms are also used to refer to present time, especially for reasons of politeness or indirectness. This is because the past tense distances an event from the present, and distancing an event can make it more indirect. Examples are given in the table below.

Examples of past tense forms referring to present time

example	tense	time referred to
A: <i>I wondered if you felt it would make a difference if more people wrote or telephoned or said what they thought.</i>	past	present time
B: <i>Well yes.</i>		
[customer on the telephone to a travel agent] <i>We were wondering about going to Amsterdam.</i> <i>We were wanting to stay in tents or in a caravan or in a bed and breakfast to see what the different prices were.</i>	past	present time

As can be seen in the table above, past tense may combine with progressive aspect (*we were wondering/we were wanting*) to further emphasise politeness, indirectness or tentativeness.

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THE PRESENT SIMPLE

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The present simple is formed using the present tense form of a lexical verb (the same as the base form) for all persons except third person singular. Third person singular is formed by adding *-s* or *-es* to the base form.

The present simple: formation

1st and 2nd person singular/plural, 3rd person plural	3rd person singular	3rd person inflection
<i>I/you/we/they/the children talk a lot.</i>	<i>He/she/it/one/the child talks a lot.</i>	in most verbs <i>-s</i> is added to base form
<i>I/you/we/they/the children worry about it.</i>	<i>He/she/it/the child worries about it.</i>	verbs ending in consonant + <i>y</i> : <i>y</i> changes to <i>i</i> , and <i>-es</i> is added to base form
<i>I/you/we/they/the children miss her.</i>	<i>He/she/it/the child misses her.</i>	verbs ending in <i>s, z, ch, sh</i> or <i>x</i> : <i>-es</i> is added to base form

For a small number of verbs ending in a single *-s*, variations are possible in which the *-s* is doubled:

To focus: He/she/it focuses (or focusses) on the problem of unemployment.

*To bus: The primary school buses (or busses) children in from miles around.
(brings them in a bus)*

To bias: The question biases (or biasses) people against voting 'yes'.

There are also some other special cases of spelling and/or pronunciation:

<i>be</i> I am <i>you/we/they are</i> <i>he/she/it is</i>	<i>do</i> <i>I/you/we/they do</i> <i>he/she/it does</i> (/dʌz/)	<i>say</i> <i>I/you/we/they say</i> <i>He/she/it says</i> (/seɪ/)
<i>have</i> <i>I/you/we/they have</i> <i>he/she/it has</i>	<i>go</i> <i>I/you/we/they go</i> <i>he/she/it goes</i>	

The declarative and interrogative forms of the present simple are shown in the table overleaf.