

# English Grammar - The Tense System

## Present Tenses

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The tense system is probably the area of the English language that causes students (and often teachers) the greatest amount of difficulty. Linguists can create a very solid argument that only two tenses exist, the present and the past, but as teachers of EFL we have to take a slightly different approach. The course books, and most reference materials that we use, will state twelve tenses. Compare this to just one tense in many Asian languages and three in most Slavic languages and you can see where there is plenty of scope for confusion.



We maintain that it is more practical for an EFL teacher to consider that there are three different times in English (tense means time); the past, the present and the future. Each of these times has four aspects; simple, continuous, perfect and perfect continuous. This gives us tenses such as present simple, past continuous, future perfect etc. Twelve in all.

It is vital that any EFL teacher has a sound knowledge of this system and is not intimidated by it.

In this unit we will look at the four present tenses; the present simple, present continuous (sometimes called the present progressive), present perfect and present perfect continuous.

Take time to digest the material contained in this unit before completing the worksheet.

## PRESENT SIMPLE

### Form

**Affirmative:** (subject + base form [+s/es])

<i>I work</i>	<i>We work</i>
<i>You work</i>	<i>You work</i>
<i>He/she/it works</i>	<i>They work</i>

**Negative:** (subject + aux. verb 'do' + not + base form)

(Note that *don't* and *doesn't* often appear as *do not* and *does not* in written text)

<i>I don't work</i>	<i>We don't work</i>
<i>You don't work</i>	<i>You don't work</i>
<i>He/she/it doesn't work</i>	<i>They don't work</i>

**Question:** (aux. verb 'do' + subject + base form)

<i>Do I work?</i>	<i>Do we work?</i>
<i>Do you work?</i>	<i>Do you work?</i>
<i>Does he/she/it work?</i>	<i>Do they work?</i>

**Now study these examples of third person singular (he/she/it) forms and think about the rules for forming them**

<i>watches</i>	<i>does</i>	<i>bats</i>	<i>preys</i>
<i>mixes</i>	<i>tries</i>	<i>looks</i>	<i>goes</i>
<i>thinks</i>	<i>takes</i>	<i>tosses</i>	<i>trespasses</i>
<i>lays</i>	<i>thrashes</i>	<i>means</i>	<i>preaches</i>
<i>fakes</i>	<i>pries</i>	<i>drinks</i>	<i>writes</i>
<i>sits</i>	<i>chops</i>	<i>has</i>	<i>amazes</i>
<i>fishes</i>	<i>swims</i>	<i>waits</i>	<i>dresses</i>

### How to form the third person singular

#### ❖ Most verbs

- Add s to the base form of the verb – *sits*
- Verbs ending in a consonant plus *y*, change *y* to *i* and add *es* – i.e. *tries*
- Verbs ending in *o*, *s*, *z*, *x*, *ch*, and *sh*, add *es* – e.g. *washes* (+ extra syllable when pronounced)
- Note in the negative form, the auxiliary verb *doesn't* has the *s* so the main verb doesn't need an *s* – e.g. *She doesn't work*. The same applies with *does* in questions.

### Usages, with example sentences:

- ❖ **Habitual or routine actions**
  - *He goes fishing every week.*
- ❖ **Permanent situations and facts**
  - *The sun sets in the west.*
- ❖ **Commentaries**
  - *Beckham passes to Fowler who shoots and scores.*
- ❖ **Directions and instructions**
  - *First you go left, then you go straight on.*
- ❖ **Newspaper headlines**
  - *Stock market falls to all time low.*
- ❖ **Present stories**
  - *So I open the door and what do I see but a policeman in a pink uniform.*



### Typical mistakes/errors

*Here are some examples of the most common problems that students have with the present simple. Correct them and make note of the error or mistake.*

- ❖ She walk to school everyday.
- ❖ He no(t) like to watch TV.
- ❖ Where lives your father?
- ❖ She go often to Paris.
- ❖ She doesn't likes football.
- ❖ I'm go to the post office tomorrow.

### Sample activate stage teaching ideas

- ❖ **Find someone who...**activities in which students have to interview one another in order to complete forms.
- ❖ **Questionnaires** whereby students ask each other questions about their habitual actions
- ❖ **A day in the life of...**students are provided with visual prompts and must then construct the daily life of somebody.
- ❖ **Guess my profession:** a student chooses a profession. The other students have a limited number of questions (twenty perhaps) in which to find out what the profession is. For example, "*Do you wear a uniform?*"
- ❖ **Information-gap** activities in which two students are provided with diagrams or maps with different information. One student then gives the other directions to a particular location.

## PRESENT CONTINUOUS

### Form

The present continuous (also known as the present progressive) tense is made with the present simple tense of the auxiliary verb *to be* and the present participle (verb plus *ing* – *working*) of the main verb.

**Affirmative:** (subject + aux. verb 'be' + verb+ing)

**Negative:** (subject + aux. verb 'be' + not + verb+ing)

**Question:** (aux. verb 'be' + subject + verb+ing)

REGULAR FORM			
PERSON	AFFIRMATIVE	NEGATIVE	QUESTION
I	I am learning	I am not learning	Am I learning?
You	You are learning	You are not learning	Are you learning?
He/she/it	He is learning	He is not learning	Is he learning?
We	We are learning	We are not learning	Are we learning?
They	They are learning	They are not learning	Are they learning?

CONTRACTED FORM			
PERSON	AFFIRMATIVE	NEGATIVE	QUESTION
I	I'm learning	I'm not learning	No contracted form
You	You're learning	You aren't learning	No contracted form
He/she/it	She's learning	She isn't learning	No contracted form
We	We're learning	We aren't learning	No contracted form
They	They're learning	They aren't learning	No contracted form

### Pronunciation

The main point relates to contracted forms: beginners can have difficulty with these and may resort to using long forms instead; drilling and constant reminders are often necessary.

Listed below are some of the main usages of the present continuous.

- To talk about an action that is in progress at the time of speaking –**  
*Please be quiet. I'm watching TV.*
- To talk about a temporary action that is not necessarily in progress at the time of speaking –**  
*I am reading a good book at the moment.*
- To emphasize very frequent actions** (often with always) – *She is always biting her nails.*
- Background events in a present story –** *So I'm standing there when a policeman comes in.*
- To describe developing situations –** *It's getting dark.*
- To refer to a regular action around a point of time –** *He's usually working at this time.*

## Non-progressive verbs

Most non-action verbs are not normally used in the continuous forms, we usually use the simple form instead. Following are some of the most common:

*Like, love, hate, understand, want, believe, hear, own, owe, seem, appear, wish, mean, remember.*

Non-progressive verbs can be roughly divided into the following groups:

- ❖ verbs of the senses (involuntary)
- ❖ verbs expressing feelings and emotions
- ❖ verbs of mental activity
- ❖ verbs of possession

There are exceptions and some verbs have different meanings depending on whether they are used in the simple or continuous tense, e.g. *She thinks you are right* (meaning = has the opinion that); *She's thinking about it* (meaning = considering)

## Typical student errors/mistakes

***Make a note of the nature of each of the following errors/mistakes:***

- ❖ He watching T.V.
- ❖ We are have a meeting.
- ❖ Do you not coming to the cinema?
- ❖ I'm working hard every day.
- ❖ I'm believing in God.

## Teaching ideas

### ❖ **Developing situations**

- A good way to get students to use the present continuous is to provide them with different information in the form of graphs, charts, or tables; they can then describe any changes which are occurring (e.g. rises in crime rates, unemployment, etc.)

### ❖ **Telling stories**

- Narrating stories using a combination of the present simple and the present continuous; these can be based on visual prompts and/or other stimuli.

### ❖ **Actions in progress**

- Mime is an excellent way of demonstrating actions; this could be a game whereby students have to guess what the action is.
- Pictures of actions are also good; an idea for an information-gap activity is to give students different pictures (of various actions) and have them discover which is the same by asking their partner about their pictures, or spot the difference type activities.

## PRESENT PERFECT

The present perfect relates the past to the present and although commonly used by a native speaker, presents some difficulties to the English language learner.

**Form** *I/you/we/they have or he/she/it has, plus the past participle*  
(with regular verbs the past participle is *verb plus ed – worked*. There are however many irregular verbs such as *write – written*)

**Affirmative:** (subject + aux. verb ‘have’ + past participle)

**Negative:** (subject + aux. verb ‘have’ + not + past participle)

**Question:** (aux. verb ‘have’ + subject + past participle)

AFFIRMATIVE	NEGATIVE	QUESTION
I have written	I haven't written	Have I written?

### Usages

**1st** When we talk about finished actions/states that happened at an indefinite time. It refers to general experience without specific detail.

➤ *I have eaten octopus.*

**2nd** When we are thinking about completed past actions carried out in an unfinished time period at the time of speaking.

➤ *It has rained a lot today.* (I.e. the rain has stopped but it is still today.)

➤ *I have eaten eight cakes this afternoon.*

**3rd** When we talk about something which began in the past and is still true now, at the time of speaking. We don't know if this is likely to continue or not.

➤ *We have lived in Paris for five years.*

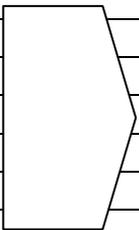
➤ *She has been a vegetarian since 1988.* (I.e. -When did she become vegetarian? – 1988. Is she still vegetarian now? - Yes.)

**4th** When we describe past actions with present results.

➤ *Oh no! I've left my purse at home.*

➤ *Can you help me? I've lost one of my contact lenses.* (Lost in the past and still lost now).

Note: The following contractions are normally used in speech (see the examples in the 4th usage above and in the examples on the following page):

Long form	becomes	Contracted form
I have		I've
You have		You've
We have		We've
They have		They've
He has		He's
She has		She's
It has		It's

## **Since or for with the present perfect**

*We've lived here for five years.*  
*I haven't slept for 48 hours.*  
*They've been at home since 8 o'clock.*  
*She has been a doctor since September.*

### **The rule with *for* or *since*:**

We use *for* with periods of time. (e.g. a week, 6 months)  
We use *since* with points of time. (e.g. Monday, 1984) to really mean 'from'.

## **Gone or been (past participles)**

*He's been to Turkey.*  
*He's gone to Turkey.*

### **The rule with *been* or *gone*:**

*He's been* means the trip is finished.  
*He's gone* means he is still on his trip.

## **Irregular past participles**

As we have already mentioned this verb tense requires the past participle. Unfortunately for English language students many of these past participles are irregular (not formed according to a set pattern). With regular past participles the verb will end in 'ed', for example, *worked, cooked, watched* etc. Irregular verbs have no such pattern and have to be learnt from memory. Most dictionaries, course books and grammar reference materials will have complete tables of irregular verbs. Below are listed just some of the most common verbs that have irregular past participles:

<b>Verb</b>	<b>Past participle</b>	<b>Verb</b>	<b>Past participle</b>
be	been	eat	eaten
have	had	drink	drunk
fall	fallen	feel	felt
hit	hit	put	put
sit	sat	see	seen
leave	left	lose	lost
go	gone	do	done
read	read	write	written
speak	spoken	give	given
say	said	tell	told
understand	understood	think	thought
teach	taught	bring	brought
come	come	sell	sold
get	got	wake	woken
take	taken	swim	swum

Please remember there are many others. This is just a list of some of the most common. See unit 2 for many more examples.

## Typical student errors/mistakes

Think about:

- ❖ What kind of errors or mistakes they are
- ❖ Why they have been made
- ❖ How you would go about correcting them.
  
- ❖ *I am a secretary for five years.*
- ❖ *I have seen him yesterday.*
- ❖ *She's liked him since six months.*
- ❖ *When have you bought your car?*

## Sample activate stage teaching ideas

- ❖ **Find someone who...**
  - *has kissed a foreigner, has been on television, has written a poem*
  - Students mingle, asking questions until they have found people who have done the things on their list. This can lead into a discussion involving the present perfect and past simple.
    - A: *Andre has been on television*
    - B: *Really! When were you on television, Andre?*
    - C: *I was on a quiz show last year.*
  
- ❖ **What have you done today?**
  - Student mimes some actions and the others guess what they are using: affirmatives or questions.
  - *You've washed your hair/Have you washed your hair?*
  - *You've changed a lightbulb/Have you changed a lightbulb?*
  
- ❖ **Change the room**
  - Three people leave the room while the others change it in five different ways (e.g. move the dustbin). The absent students then return and try and guess what has been done. (e.g. *Have you moved the desk?*)
  
- ❖ **Song U2 – 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For'**
  
- ❖ **Role-play – Job interview**

## PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS

This tense relates past activities to the present. It implies that either the activity is likely to continue in the future, or that the activity was in progress for some length of time, or both.

### Form

**Affirmative:** (subject + aux. verb 'have' + been + verb+ing)

**Negative:** (subject + aux. verb 'have' + not + been + verb+ing)

**Question:** (aux. verb 'have' + subject + been + verb+ing)

AFFIRMATIVE	NEGATIVE	QUESTION
I have been dancing.	I haven't been dancing.	Have I been dancing?

### Usages

**1st To communicate an incomplete and ongoing activity, when we want to say how long it has continued** – *I've been dieting for the last twenty years.* (And am likely to continue doing so)

**2nd To describe a recently finished, uninterrupted activity which has a present result** – *I'm tired because I've been chopping logs all day.* (I.e. the work lasted some time and was intensive.)

### Typical student errors/mistakes

Using verbs that don't take the continuous form. (e.g. *like, prefer, believe*)

*I've been knowing her for three months.*

### Comparison of present perfect with present perfect continuous.

With the present perfect continuous, the emphasis is on the **action/activity NOT the result/completed action.**

*What have you been doing today?*

*I've been cleaning the car.*

*What have you done today?*

*I've cleaned the car.*

Note that we do not use the present perfect continuous to communicate the number of things we have done; for this we use the present perfect.

*I've written six letters since breakfast.*

*I've been writing letters since breakfast.*

*I've marked twenty tests since lunchtime.*

*I've been marking tests since lunchtime.*

**Sample activate stage teaching ideas:**

1. A student takes a piece of paper with a past activity and a result written on it.

- *You've been chopping onions. You're crying.*
- *You've been playing football. You're dirty.*
- *You've been washing your dog. You're wet.*
- *You've been chasing a bank robber. You're sweaty.*

The student tells the others the result and they have to guess the activity.

- E.g. A: *I'm crying.* B: *Have you been watching a sad film?*

2. Students survey the class to find out who has been doing something the longest. They should write the surveys themselves!

