English Grammar - The Tense System
Past Tenses

The system and structure of past tenses is not too different from present tenses, except that past tenses obviously relate to past time periods. You should begin to see certain similarities in usage and form emerging. Some of the rules you should be able to notice at this stage are:

All continuous forms feature some form of the verb ‘to be’ plus the ‘ing’ form of the verb. If the verb ‘to be’ is in the present, it will be the present continuous. If the verb ‘to be’ is in the past, it will be the past continuous. Later on you will see the same principles apply to future tenses.

All perfect forms feature some form of the verb ‘to have’ and the past participle form of the verb. If the verb ‘to have’ is in the present, it will be the present perfect. If the verb ‘to have’ is in the past, it will be the past perfect. Later on you will see the same principles apply to future tenses.

All perfect continuous forms feature some form of the verb ‘to have’, plus ‘been’, plus the ‘ing’ form of the verb. If the verb ‘to have’ is in the present, it will be the present perfect continuous. If the verb ‘to have’ is in the past, it will be the past perfect continuous. Later on you will see the same principles apply to future tenses.

After reading and assimilating the more detailed information contained in this unit, please complete the accompanying worksheet.
PAST SIMPLE

Form

Regular verbs

**Affirmative:** (add *-ed* or *–d* to the base form of the verb)

*I worked, I played, I hoped* etc.

**Negative:** (add *did not* or *didn’t* before the base form)

*I didn’t work* etc.

**Question:** (add *did* plus subject before the base form)

*Did you work?* etc.

Irregular verbs

There is only one simple past verb which has two forms according to person. That is the verb ‘to be’ which has the forms ‘was’ (used with I, he, she and it) and ‘were’ (used with you, we and they). For all other verbs the form stays the same for all persons.

Many common verbs in English have an irregular simple past form (i.e. one that is not created simply by adding *ed*). Unfortunately, there are no rules to help students know which are irregular, or how they are formed. For example:

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<tr>
<th>BASE FORM</th>
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<th>BASE FORM</th>
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<tr>
<td>be</td>
<td>was/were</td>
<td>pay</td>
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Usages

It is used for actions completed at a definite time in the past. It is therefore used:

- **For a past action when the time is given**
  - I met him yesterday.
  - Pasteur died in 1890.
  - Their time expired 30 seconds ago.

- **When the time is asked about**
  - When did you meet him?
  - When did the Second World War break out?

- **When the action clearly took place at a definite time even though this time is not mentioned**
  - The train arrived ten minutes late.
  - How did you get your present job?
  - We sold our Porsche a long time ago.
  - My grandmother met Queen Victoria.

- **Sometimes the time becomes definite as a result of a question and answer in the present perfect**
  - Where have you been? – I've been to the opera. – Did you enjoy it?

It’s probably worth pointing out to students that if they see the word *ago*, then the tense associated with it is probably going to be the past simple.

Common mistakes/errors

Most mistakes/errors with this tense arise from the use of *did* and *did not* for questions and negatives, and use of irregular verbs. Usage problems often lead to confusion with present perfect tense.

Sample activate teaching ideas

- To teach the irregular verb forms: card games, such as memory pairs, fish, etc. – matching present tense with past (*go-went*)
- Narrative story telling in conjunction with past continuous and past perfect
- Curriculum Vitae
- Interview role-play
- Discussing past holidays/major events, etc.
PAST CONTINUOUS

Form

Past tense of the auxiliary verb be (was/were) + the present participle (verb+‘ing’)

**Affirmative:** (subject + was/were + verb+‘ing’)

**Negative:** (subject + was/were + not + verb+‘ing’)

**Question:** (was/were + subject + verb+‘ing’)

Usage

- **For interrupted past actions.** While I was having a bath, the phone rang.

- **Used without a time expression, it can indicate gradual development that took place in the past.**
  - It was getting darker.
  - The winds were rising.

- **It can express an action, which began before that time and probably continued after it.** At eight he was having breakfast implies that he was in the middle of breakfast at eight, i.e. that he had started it before eight. He had breakfast at eight would imply that he started at eight.

- **We use the continuous tense in descriptions.** Note the combination of description (past continuous) with narrative (past simple). When I woke up, the sun was shining and the birds were singing.

Note that the past continuous almost always requires some form of time reference. For example, I was playing tennis simply doesn’t make sense, as we don’t know when. One of the few occasions when it is possible to use the past continuous without a specific time reference is with the gradual development usage, as detailed above.

Typical student errors/mistakes

- Omission of the verb to be
- Omission of the -ing
- Use of -ing with state verbs (see present continuous)
- Confusion with past simple

Sample activate stage teaching ideas

- Detective game: Where were you yesterday at 7:00 p.m.? What were you doing? Etc
- Use of diaries/journals. What were you doing at 7.00am on Monday?
- Telling stories: Narrating and describing a story using a combination of past simple and past continuous; these can be based on visual prompts and/or other stimuli.
**PAST PERFECT**

**Form**

- **Affirmative:** (subject + had + past participle)
- **Negative:** (subject + had+ not + past participle)
- **Question:** (had + subject + past participle)

**Usage**

The past equivalent of the present perfect, e.g. *When I arrived the concert had started.*

So, which was first, my arrival or the start of the concert? And how do you know?

Well, hopefully your answers to the 2 questions were:

- The start of the concert.
- Because I wrote ‘had started’.

*Had started* is an example of the Past Perfect. Now have a look at these 4 sentences:

1. *When I got to the car park I realised that I had lost my keys.*
2. *She told me she had worked in France and Germany.*
3. *He arrived late; he hadn’t realised the roads would be so icy.*
4. *She was upset because Paul hadn’t telephoned.*

You should see that all of the past perfect verbs (in bold type) represent actions that occurred before other actions in the past. Thus we can say the past perfect is ‘the past in the past’, or the past viewed from another past viewpoint.

**Completely finished actions**

Try to complete these 2 sentences with a suitable word to emphasise the fact that a past perfect action is 100% over:

- “______ he had painted the kitchen, he decided to rest.”
- “______ she had finished the report, she realized that it was too late to post it.”

As you have probably guessed, *after* and *when* are often used to show that a past action had completely finished before another action in the past started.

**Sample activate stage teaching ideas**

- Story telling/writing in conjunction with other past tenses.
- Give students a final situation and ask them to think of reasons why that situation had happened.
- Students see a story and then retell the story backwards, starting from the end and describing what had happened before.
PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS

Form

Affirmative: (subject + had + been + verb+ing)

Negative: (subject + had+ not + been + verb+ing)

Question: (had + subject + been + verb+ing)

Usage

The past perfect continuous certainly isn’t the most frequently used (or taught) tense in the English language but it does have one major use:

To talk about longer actions or situations in the past that had been going on continuously up to the past moment that we are thinking about. We don’t know or are not concerned with whether or not it continued after.

E.g. Before eating lunch, she had been clipping her toenails for two hours.

Common student mistakes/errors

As this tense has two auxiliary verbs – ‘had’ and ‘been’ – the omission of either one of those or the failure to add ‘ing’ to the main form are the major errors with this structure. Some problems with usage can also be expected as it can be easily confused with the past perfect (which stresses completed actions), and the past continuous. The latter implies that the action happened around a time and not just up to that time.