



Helpsheet

VERB TENSES

Use this sheet to help you:

- use English verb tenses correctly

5 minute self test

Choose the appropriate verb tenses for the following sentences:

1. Jones (1998) [argue] that...
2. Jones (1998) [use] three subjects in his experiment.
3. From 1991 to 2001, sales [decrease].
4. Since 2002, sales [increase].
5. Profits [fluctuate] recently.
6. At present, the company [face] an uncertain future.
7. It is widely believed that interest rates [be] rise.
8. It is widely believed many of the world's oil reserves [run out] by 2020.
9. This time next year, she [live] in the UK.
10. By the time he [be] 25, Gates [make] his first million.

Check your answers on Page 8

This publication can be cited as: Davies, W. M. (2007), *Verb Tenses*, Teaching and Learning Unit, Faculty of Economics and Commerce, the University of Melbourne. <http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/>
Further credits: Beaumont, T. (content changes and editing), Pesina, J. (design and layout).



FACULTY OF
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Why are English tenses so hard to learn?

English has three main tenses (present, past and future) though these are made more complex by the existence of simple, perfect, continuous and perfect continuous forms.

One reason international students can find English tenses hard to learn is because some languages do not use tenses. Some languages make the time of an event clear by the addition of adverbs such as today, yesterday, or in the case of Japanese and Korean, adverbial particles. Other languages, such as Mandarin, use word order to indicate the time of an event. Unfortunately for international students, English has a complex system of tenses that they must learn.

The following Helpsheet provides an overview of the English tense system. The Helpsheet is not designed as an all-encompassing guide to tenses, but rather as a reference of particular use for students preparing assignments within the Faculty.

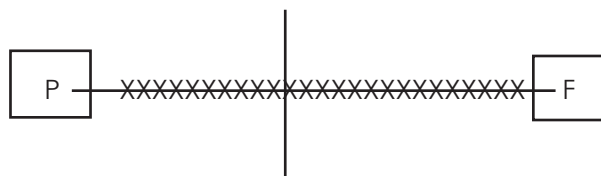
You may find that the differences between each tense or future form are in some cases best indicated by means of the diagrams below and it is worth comparing these diagrams. Please note that "P" and "F" represent past and future. The intersection of the lines represents the present.

1. Simple present

Examples:

- The share market *is* volatile.
- I *study* every morning.

This tense can be used to describe general states, truths, habits or recurring actions that are not limited to past, present or future.



**When the past is present**

Confusingly, in academic writing, we often use the present tense to describe literature which has been published in the past. The rationale for this is simple: if it is *ideas* we are discussing, not experiments, surveys, or things that are finished, and if the ideas are still being evaluated or used, then they are considered present (even if they were published a long time ago).

- Jones (1998) *argues* that ... (not *argued*)
- Smith (1966) *claims* that ... (not *claimed*)

It is assumed that Smith and Jones still believe their own ideas.

By contrast, if Smith or Jones did experiments in 1998 and 1966, we would use the past tense because, unlike their ideas, their experiments are completed events:

- Jones (1998) *used* three subjects in his experiment. His results indicated that ...

This practice is not consistent in some academic journals. For example, in Finance, the present tense is sometimes used even for past, completed events:

- In their experiment, Jones and Harris (1990) *find* that the yield spread between the long rate and short rate is an optimal predictor of future changes of short rates over the life of the long bond.

Pay attention to the normal conventions of present for ideas and past for completed things, as noted above, but, if in doubt, ask questions and follow the tense conventions of your subject.

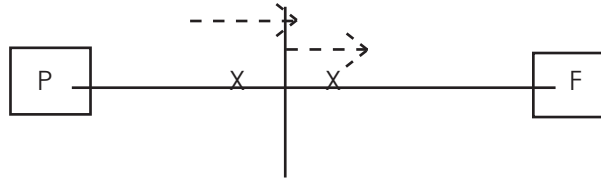
2. Present continuous

Examples:

- Interest rates *are rising* around the world.
- Share prices *are falling*.
- I *am studying* for my master's degree.



The present continuous indicates something happening in the present that may continue into the future, and which carries an implication that it started in the past. This tense is used when you want to convey a sense of an activity “going on” or want to signify an event is temporary (compare: ‘I live in Melbourne’ with ‘I’m living in Melbourne’. ‘I live in Melbourne’ appears more permanent).



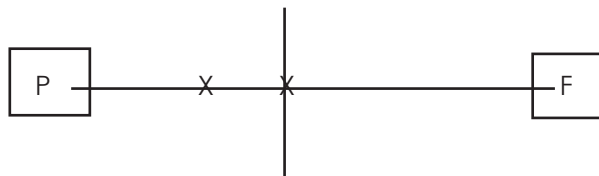
3. Present perfect

Examples:

- I *have studied* hard this year, so I am confident of passing the exam.
- The manager *has tried* to implement all the solutions.
- He *has already studied* Chapter 3.

This tense is difficult to use but is often unavoidable. Its main uses are to: talk about something which began in the past and continues until now; talk about a past event with an effect that is still present; talk about an event that has just happened; talk about something that happened at an unspecified time in the past; or talk about an experience.

This tense is formed using the verb “to have” plus the past participle (i.e., the form of verb ending in “ed” such as studied, tried.)



4. Present perfect continuous

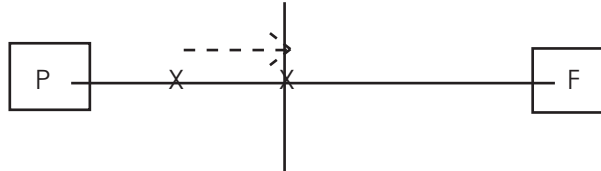
Examples:

- I *have been performing* well in the class, and I deserve a HD.
- He *has been waiting* for an opportunity to takeover the company.



This tense can also be difficult to use. It is generally used to describe something that started at some indeterminate time in the past and has continued to the present time.

It is formed with the verb form has/have + been + verb + ing.



5. Simple past

Examples:

- The company directors *behaved* badly during the stock market crash.
- The researchers *found* that one out of five subjects smoked cigarettes.

This tense is used for finished activities. This is how we describe surveys, experiments, periods of data collection, results from fieldwork, and so on.

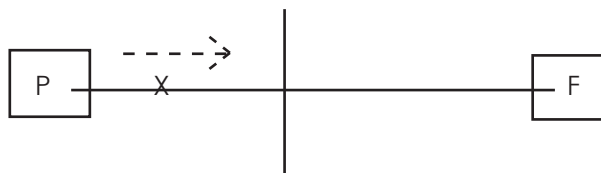


6. Past continuous

Examples:

- The share prices *were rising* around the world when I invested my money.
- The manager *was changing* his approach to sales before the stock market crashed.

This tense is used to describe an event or activity that started in the past and continued until a particular time (often unspecified) or event. The past continuous is often used together with the simple past to provide background to an event, particularly when that event interrupted something.





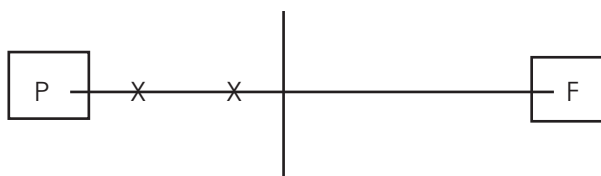
7. Past perfect

Examples:

- He *had already started* to lose money in 1996; long before the crash occurred.
- By March, the manager *had initiated* a process of revitalising the company.

This tense allows the description of one past event before another past event. It also allows the specification of particular times in the past (this is not possible with the present perfect). It is possible to avoid use of the past perfect if the events described in the text are done so in order or with words such as “before”, “then” and “after”.

The past perfect is constructed with the verb has/have + past participle.



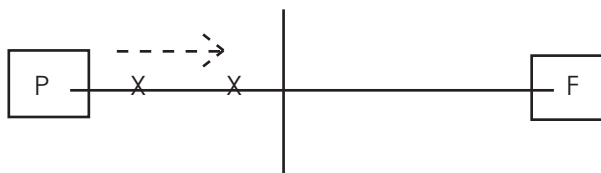
8. Past perfect continuous

Examples:

- Rumours about the manager's new policies on staff retrenchment *had been circulating* around the company.
- I *had been working* for three years in the same job when I was head-hunted by another company.
- The manager was fired because *he had been taking* money from the company.

This tense is used to describe a past event which continued until or just before another past event. It is sometimes used to show cause and effect of an event (see the third example above).

It is constructed using the verb “had been” + continuous ('ing') form of verb





9. Simple future

Examples:

- I *will invest* in the share market tomorrow.
- He *will be asked* to attend the Student Progress Committee if he fails the subject twice.

This tense is used to describe a specified event in the future that is discrete (one-off) and not emphasised as a continuous event. It is also often used for predictions, assumptions or opinions about the future. Furthermore, the simple future can be used for offers or to specify intentions.



10. Future continuous

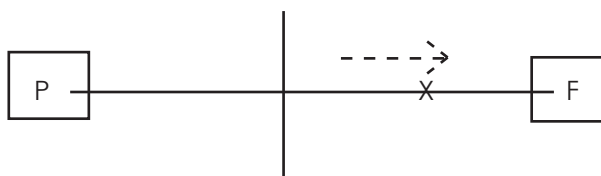
Examples:

- I *will be investing* in the share market tomorrow.
- He *will be attending* a concert next week so he *will not be going* to the Student Progress meeting.*

*NB: It is always good to try to keep tenses consistent in the same sentence where possible, unless there is a good reason to use a different tense, e.g.

- He *will be attending* a concert next week, and he *must go* because his employer has asked him to attend.

The future perfect can be used when describing an event that will be in progress at a specified time in the future. It can also refer to a future event without specifying intention.





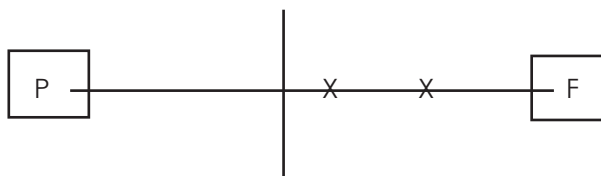
11. Future perfect

Examples:

- The student *will have begun* his studies before the other students arrive.
- I *will have finished* the work before he comes to see it.

This tense is used to describe one action or event in the future in relation to another event in the future. It is commonly used to express predictions and assumptions.

It is constructed with “will + perfect infinitive”. The word “by” is often used with the future perfect.



12. Future perfect continuous

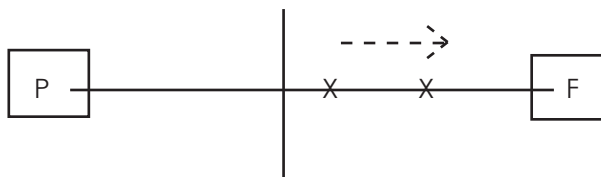
Examples:

- The student *will have been studying* before the other students arrive.
- I am *going to have been waiting* for more than an hour before the interview starts.

This tense can be difficult to use. It is used to show how an event in the future will continue until another future time where it terminates. The present perfect continuous and past perfect continuous are similar. However, unlike the future perfect continuous, they carry no precise termination point.

It is constructed using: “will have been” + verb[ing]”. As with the future perfect, it is often used with the word “by”.

Note that “will” can be used instead of “going to have” with no loss of meaning.





Answers

5 minute self test

Please note that in some cases below other verb tenses may be used. If you are unsure, refer again to the Helpsheet or make an appointment to speak with the TLU.

1. Jones (1998) argues that...
2. Jones (1998) used three subjects in his experiment.
3. From 1991 to 2001, sales decreased.
4. Since 2002, sales have increased.
5. Profits have been fluctuating recently.
6. At present, the company faces an uncertain future.
7. It is widely believed that interest rates will rise.
8. It is widely believed many of the world's oil reserves will have run out by 2020.
9. This time next year, she will be living in the UK.
10. By the time he was 25, Gates had made his first million.

Further Reading

There are countless websites available on English tenses with useful links and diagrams, even cartoons! There is also an excellent interactive CD-Rom, which is well worth the purchase price

Englishpage (URL: <http://www.englishpage.com/index.html>)

English grammar online for you (URL:
<http://www.ego4u.com/en/cram-up/grammar/tenses>)

English tenses with cartoons (URL: <http://www.englishtenseswithcartoons.com/>)

Tensebuster (URL: <http://www.clarity.com.hk/program/tensebuster.htm>)