

The 12 English Tenses Chart

A practical grammar reference with structures, signal words, examples, common mistakes and quick practice tasks.

Best for intermediate and advanced learners

Use this guide when writing, speaking, revising grammar, preparing lessons, or checking which tense fits a sentence.

Printable PDF reference

How English Tenses Work

English tenses help us show when an action happens and how that action relates to time. The easiest way to understand the system is to separate time frame from aspect.

There are three time frames: present, past and future. There are four aspects: simple, continuous, perfect and perfect continuous. Together, they create the 12 main English tenses.

The simple formula

3 time frames × 4 aspects = 12 English tenses. Once you understand this pattern, the system becomes much easier to remember.

Time frame	What it tells you	Example
Present	Something connected to now, general truth, habit, routine or current situation.	I study English.
Past	Something that happened before now.	I studied English yesterday.
Future	Something expected, planned or predicted after now.	I will study English tomorrow.

Aspect	Main focus	Example
Simple	A fact, routine, repeated action or completed event.	I study English.
Continuous	An action in progress at a specific time.	I am studying English.
Perfect	An action completed before another time, often with a present or past result.	I have studied English.
Perfect continuous	An action that continued for a period of time up to another time.	I have been studying English.

The 12 English Tenses Chart

Use this as your main reference. Start with the tense name, check the structure, then compare the signal words and example sentence.

Tense	Structure	Main use	Signal words	Example
Present simple	subject + base verb (+ s/es)	habits, facts, routines	always, usually, often, sometimes, every day	She drinks coffee every morning.
Present continuous	am/is/are + verb-ing	actions happening now or temporary situations	now, right now, at the moment, currently	They are watching a film right now.
Present perfect	have/has + past participle	past actions with present relevance; experiences	already, yet, just, ever, never, before	I have visited Paris twice.
Present perfect continuous	have/has + been + verb-ing	ongoing action from past to present	for, since, all day, recently, lately	She has been studying for three hours.
Past simple	subject + past form of verb	completed action at a specific past time	yesterday, last week, ago, in 2020	He called me yesterday.
Past continuous	was/were + verb-ing	past action in progress; interrupted action	while, when, at 8 p.m., all morning	I was cooking when she arrived.
Past perfect	had + past participle	action completed before another past action	before, after, already, by the time	They had left before we got there.
Past perfect continuous	had + been + verb-ing	ongoing past action before another past event	for, since, before, all day	He had been working there for five years before he quit.
Future simple	will + base verb	predictions, promises, spontaneous decisions	tomorrow, next week, soon, later	I will call you tomorrow.
Future continuous	will + be + verb-ing	action in progress at a future moment	this time tomorrow, at 8 p.m., next week	This time next week, I'll be sitting on a beach.
Future perfect	will + have + past participle	action completed before a future point	by Friday, by then, before, by the time	By Friday, she will have finished the report.
Future perfect continuous	will + have + been + verb-ing	duration up to a future point	for, since, by next year, by the time	By next year, they will have been married for 20 years.

How to Use the Chart

Do not try to memorise the 12 tenses as 12 disconnected grammar rules. Use a simple decision process instead.

Question to ask	Best tense family	Example
Is it a habit, fact, routine or completed action?	Simple	I study every evening. / He called yesterday.
Is the action in progress at a specific time?	Continuous	I am studying now. / I was cooking when she arrived.
Was it completed before another time?	Perfect	I have finished. / They had left before we arrived.
Do you want to emphasise duration?	Perfect continuous	I have been studying for two years.

Quick learner tip

Signal words are useful clues, but meaning comes first. The word “when”, for example, can appear with different tenses depending on the sentence.

Four Quick Comparisons

Present simple vs present continuous: I study English every evening. = a routine. | I am studying English right now. = happening now.

Past simple vs present perfect: I visited Paris last year. = finished past time. | I have visited Paris twice. = life experience, no specific finished time.

Past continuous vs past perfect continuous: I was studying when he called. = action in progress at that past moment. | I had been studying for three hours when he called. = duration before that past moment.

Future perfect vs future perfect continuous: By Friday, I will have finished the course. = completion. | By Friday, I will have been studying for six weeks. = duration.

Signal Words Cheat Sheet

Signal words can help you choose the right tense. They are not fixed rules, but they give you useful clues about time, completion and duration.

Signal word or phrase	Often used with	Example
always, usually, often	Present simple	She usually studies in the evening.
every day, every week	Present simple	I practise English every day.
now, right now	Present continuous	They are speaking now.
at the moment, currently	Present continuous	I am currently learning English.
already	Present perfect / past perfect	She has already finished.
yet	Present perfect	Have you finished yet?
just	Present perfect	I have just arrived.
ever, never	Present perfect	Have you ever visited London?
for	Perfect or perfect continuous tenses	I have been studying for two hours.
since	Perfect or perfect continuous tenses	She has lived here since 2020.
yesterday	Past simple	He called me yesterday.
last week, last year	Past simple	We travelled last year.
ago	Past simple	I started two years ago.
while	Past continuous	She was reading while I was cooking.
when	Past continuous / past simple	I was cooking when she arrived.
before, after	Past perfect / past simple	They had left before we arrived.
tomorrow	Future simple	I will call you tomorrow.
this time tomorrow	Future continuous	This time tomorrow, I will be flying to Spain.
by Friday, by next year	Future perfect / future perfect continuous	By Friday, I will have finished the project.
by the time	Perfect tenses	By the time you arrive, I will have been waiting for an hour.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Mistake	Incorrect	Correct
Forgetting -s in the present simple third person	She drink coffee every morning.	She drinks coffee every morning.
Using continuous form with stative verbs	I am knowing the answer.	I know the answer.
Using present perfect with a finished time	I have visited Paris last year.	I visited Paris last year.
Forgetting "be" in continuous tenses	I will studying tomorrow.	I will be studying tomorrow.
Using the wrong past form after "have/has/had"	She has went home.	She has gone home.
Using future simple when completion matters	By Friday, she will finish it.	By Friday, she will have finished it.

Mini Practice: Choose the Right Tense

Choose the best tense for each sentence. Answers are at the bottom of the page.

1. She _____ coffee every morning. (drink)
2. They _____ a film right now. (watch)
3. I _____ Paris twice. (visit)
4. He _____ me yesterday. (call)
5. I _____ when she arrived. (cook)
6. They _____ before we got there. (leave)
7. By Friday, she _____ the report. (finish)
8. By next year, they _____ married for 20 years. (be)

Answers

1. drinks | 2. are watching | 3. have visited | 4. called | 5. was cooking | 6. had left | 7. will have finished | 8. will have been

Final Reminder

The 12 English tenses become much easier when you stop thinking of them as separate rules. First choose the time frame: present, past or future. Then choose the aspect: simple, continuous, perfect or perfect continuous. The structure follows from there.

Keep this chart nearby and use it whenever you are unsure which tense to choose.