How Do I Choose the Right Verb Tense?

Some languages, like English, mark their verbs to indicate the time at which events took place. We use a sequence of tenses to indicate how close the action is to the moment of speaking.

**The Tense Continuum**

We can visualize the relationship between the time of action and the time of speaking more clearly if we use a timeline.

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<th>Past</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Future</th>
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On this timeline, actions that take place at the time of speaking (now) are in the **present tense**: “I see the building.” Actions that precede the time of speaking are in the **past tense**: “I wrote an essay about verb tense.” Actions that happen after the time of speaking are in the **future tense**: “I will meet you for lunch.”

If we put these three sentences in different tenses together, we have a sequence of tenses. For example: “This morning, I wrote an essay about verb tense. I now see the building where I will meet you for lunch.”

**Adding Aspect**

Verb tense describes when an action occurs: in the past, present, or future. English speakers also add an **aspect** to the **verb tense** to describe a completed action and a continuous (or ongoing) action, an action that has not been completed.

In English, there are three **aspects** applied to verb tenses: **simple**, **perfect**, and **progressive**.

The **Simple Verb Tense** gets its name from the fact that no additional **auxiliary verb** is needed to describe a completed or ongoing action. (You may have learned about auxiliary verbs as “helping verbs”: forms of to be and to have.) We use the **simple tense** when the degree of completion is not important to the meaning of the sentence, or when something is habitual or repeated (e.g. “I go to school every day”). These forms of the verb are the same as above, for example:

- Simple **past tense**: “I wrote an essay about verb tense” – a completed action
- Simple **present tense**: “I see the building” – an ongoing action (happening in the present)
- Simple **future tense**: “I will meet you for lunch” – an action taking place in the future.
The **Perfect Verb Tense** adds an auxiliary/helping verb that describes when an action was, is being, or will be completed. In the perfect tense, the completed action takes place in the past, present, or future, and there is a sense of duration or culmination. For example:

- **Perfect past tense**: I had completed my essay (when you called me this morning).
- **Perfect present tense**: I have completed my essay (and am now going to sleep).
- **Perfect future tense**: I will have completed my essay by the due date.

The **Progressive Verb Tense**: adds a helping verb that describes when an action was, is, or will be continuously taking place. In the progressive tense (sometimes called the “continuous” tense), the ongoing action takes place in the past, present, or future. For example:

- Past progressive: I was writing my essay (when you called me this morning).
  (Notice that one action [was writing] happens in the background, and another [called] happens in the foreground.)
- Present progressive: I am writing my essay right now.
- Future progressive: I will be writing my essay at the café tomorrow.

Lastly, a combination of the **perfect** and **progressive aspects** can be used to describe actions that were in progress for some time (in the past) OR are still happening habitually. The aspects add a sense of duration. For example:

- Past perfect progressive: I had been going to the Writing Center often.
- Present perfect progressive: I have been going to UT two years.
- Future perfect progressive: By next May, I will have been going to UT for three years.

**Guess the Tense and Aspect**

Below are some examples for practice: *(Hint: the verbs in bold are in the infinitive form, and therefore do not change.)*

1) When I was going to the store, I saw my best friend.
2) Currently, I am attending UT Austin to study geology.
3) I will be going to graduate school in California.
4) I was in the Department of Engineering, but I am now the Department of Linguistics.
5) I had written an email to my friend just before she came up to talk to me.
6) At this stage of my academic career, I have written that type of essay many times.

**Answer:** 1. (a) past progressive (b) simple past; 2. (a) present progressive; 3. (a) future progressive; 4. (a) simple past (b) simple present; 5. (a) past perfect (b) simple past; 6. (a) present perfect