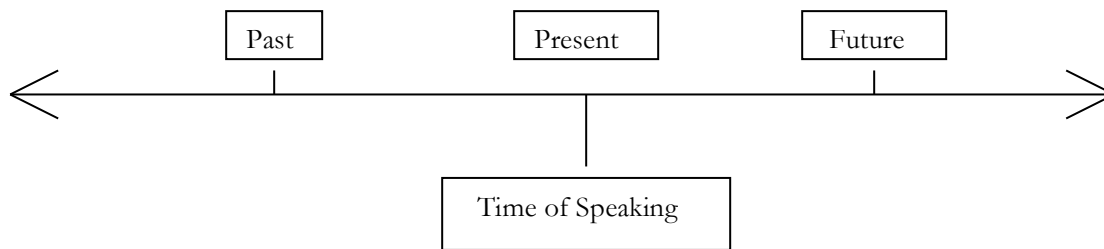


How Do I Choose the Right Verb Tense?

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.



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 for 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.

Answers: 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