

# 16 Past tenses overview

## 16.1 PAST TENSES

The **past simple** refers to a single, completed action in the past.

Phil **washed** his car on Tuesday.

This is a completed action in the past that is now over.

The **past continuous** refers to a continuing action in the past.

The last time I saw Phil, he **was washing** his car.

At that moment, he was in the process of washing his car.

The **present perfect simple** refers to an unfinished action or series of actions that started in the past, or past actions that still have a consequence in the present moment.

Eve **has arrived** in London.

Eve is still in London, so it is still relevant to the present moment.

The **present perfect continuous** refers to a continuing activity in the past that still has a consequence in the present moment.

I **have been painting** the house all day. I'm exhausted!

This is a consequence in the present moment.

## 16.2 PAST SIMPLE AND PRESENT PERFECT SIMPLE

The **past simple** is used to refer to single, completed actions or events in the past. These no longer have a consequence in the present moment.



I **wrote** my essay about Ancient Greece.

The essay is finished, so the past simple is used.



I **lost** my keys, but I **found** them on my desk.

This is no longer relevant to the present moment, because the keys were found.

The **present perfect simple** is used to refer to actions or events in the past that are unfinished, or still have consequences in the present moment.



I **have written** half of my essay, but I need to finish it.

The essay is unfinished, so the present perfect simple is used.



I **have lost** my keys. I can't find them anywhere!

The keys are still lost in the present moment, so the present perfect simple is used.

There are eight different ways to talk about the past in English. The differences between the past simple and the present perfect simple are particularly important.

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The **past perfect simple** refers to an action or event that took place before another action or event in the past.

The game **had started** when I arrived at the stadium.

The **past perfect continuous** refers to a continuing action or event that was taking place before another action or event that happened in the past.

I **had been feeling** unwell for days, so I went to the doctor.

"Used to" and "Would" are used to talk about repeated actions in the past that no longer happen.

I **{ used to / would }** go to Spain every year.

"Used to" can also be used to refer to a fixed state at some indefinite time in the past that is no longer true.

I **used to** live in London.

"Live" is a state, so "would" can't be used.

## 16.3 KEY LANGUAGE NARRATIVE TENSES

Narrative tenses are types of past tense that are used when telling a story.

The **past continuous** is used to set the scene. The **past simple** describes actions in the story.

The **past perfect** is used to talk about things that happened before the beginning of the story.

A crowd of people **were celebrating** the New Year when one of the young men **kneeled down** in front of his girlfriend and **asked** her to marry him. He **had planned** everything beforehand.

