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Past tenses

I. The simple past

The **simple past** is a verb tense that is used to talk about things that happened or existed before now.

The simple past tense, sometimes called the preterit, is used to talk about a **completed action** in a time **before now**. The simple past is the basic form of past tense in English. The time of the action can be in the recent past or the distant past and action duration is not important.

Examples

- John Cabot **sailed** to America in 1498.
- My father **died** last year.

You always use the simple past when you say **when** something happened, so it is associated with certain past time expressions

- **Frequency:** *often, sometimes, always*
I sometimes **walked** home at lunchtime.
I often **brought** my lunch to school.
- **A definite point in time:** *last week, when I was a child, yesterday, six weeks ago*
We **saw** a good film *last week*.
Yesterday, I **arrived** in Geneva.
She **finished** her work *at seven o'clock*
I **went** to the theatre *last night*
- **An indefinite point in time:** *the other day, ages ago, a long time ago*
People **lived** in caves *a long time ago*.
She **played** the piano *when she was a child*.

Note: the word *ago* is a useful way of expressing the distance into the past. It is placed **after** the period of time: *a week ago, three years ago, a minute ago*.

The form

Affirmative		
Subject	+ verb + ed	
I	skipped.	
Negative		
Subject	+ did not	+ infinitive without <i>to</i>
They	didn't	go.
Interrogative		
Did	+ subject	+ infinitive without <i>to</i>
Did	she	arrive?

Interrogative negative		
Did not	+ subject	+ infinitive without <i>to</i>
Didn't	you	play?

Simple past tense of to be, to have, to do

Subject	Verb		
	Be	Have	Do
I	was	had	did
You	were	had	did
He/She/It	was	had	did
We	were	had	did
You	were	had	did
They	were	had	did

Simple past, irregular verbs

Some verbs are irregular in the simple past. Here are the most common ones.

To go

- He **went** to a club last night.

- **Did he go** to the cinema last night?
- He **didn't go** to bed early last night.

To give

- We **gave** her a doll for her birthday.
- They **didn't give** John their new address.
- **Did Barry give** you my passport?

To come

- My parents **came** to visit me last July.
- We **didn't come** because it was raining.
- **Did he come** to your party last week?

II. The past continuous

The past continuous describes actions or events in a time **before now**, which began in the past and are **still going on** when another event occurred.

It is used:

- Often, to describe the background in a story written in the past tense, e.g. "The sun **was shining** and the birds **were singing** as the elephant came out of the jungle. The other animals **were relaxing** in the shade of the trees, but the elephant moved very quickly. She **was looking** for her baby, and she didn't notice the hunter who **was watching** her through his binoculars. When the shot rang out, she **was running** towards the river..."
- To describe an unfinished action that was interrupted by another event or action, e.g. "I **was having** a beautiful dream when the alarm clock rang."
- To express a change of mind: e.g. "I **was going** to spend the day at the beach but I've decided to get my homework done instead."
- With '*wonder*', to make a very polite request: e.g. "I **was wondering** if you could baby-sit for me tonight."

Examples

- They were waiting for the bus when the accident happened.
- Caroline was skiing when she broke her leg.
- When we arrived he was having a bath.

- When the fire started I was watching television.

Forming the past continuous

The past continuous of any verb is composed of two parts: the past tense of the verb "to be" (*was/were*), and the base of the main verb *+ing*.

Subject	+was/were	+base + ing
They	were	watching
Affirmative		
She	was	reading
Negative		
She	wasn't	reading
Interrogative		
Was	she	reading?

Subject	+was/were	+base + ing
Interrogative negative		
Wasn't	she	reading?

To play, past continuous

Affirmative	Negative	Interrogative
I was playing	I was not playing	Was I playing?
You were playing	You were not playing	Were you playing?
He was playing	He wasn't playing	Was he playing?
We were playing	We weren't playing	Were we playing?
They were playing	They weren't playing	Were they playing?

III. *the past perfect*

The past perfect refers to a time **earlier than before now**. It is used to make it clear that **one event happened before another** in the past. It does not matter which event is mentioned first - the tense makes it clear which one happened first.

In these examples, Event A is the event that happened first and Event B is the second or more recent event:

Event A	Event B
John had gone out	when I arrived in the office.
Event A	Event B
I had saved my document	before the computer crashed.
Event B	Event A
When they arrived	we had already started cooking.
Event B	Event A
He was very tired	because he hadn't slept well.

Forming the past perfect

The Past Perfect tense in English is composed of two parts: the past tense of the verb *to have* (*had*) + the past participle of the main verb.

Subject	+had	+past participle
Affirmative		
She	had	given
Negative		

Subject	+had	+past participle
She	hadn't	asked.
Interrogative		
Had	they	arrived?
Interrogative Negative		
Hadn't	you	finished?

To decide, past perfect

Affirmative	Negative	Interrogative
I had decided	I hadn't decided	Had I decided?
You had decided	You hadn't decided	Had you decided?
She had decided	She hadn't decided	Had she decided?
We had decided	We hadn't decided	Had we decided?
They had decided	They hadn't decided	Had they decided?

Past perfect + just

'Just' is used with the past perfect to refer to an event that was only a short time earlier than before now, e.g.

- The train **had just left** when I arrived at the station.
- She **had just left** the room when the police arrived.
- I **had just put** the washing out when it started to rain.

IV. *The past perfect continuous*

The past perfect continuous corresponds to the present perfect continuous, but with reference to a time earlier than 'before now'. As with the present perfect continuous, we are more interested in the **process**.

Examples

- **Had you been waiting** long before the taxi arrived?
- **We had been trying** to open the door for five minutes when Jane found her key.
- **It had been raining** hard for several hours and the streets were very wet.
- Her friends **had been thinking** of calling the police when she walked in.

Forming the past perfect continuous

The past perfect continuous is composed of two elements - the past perfect of the verb *to be* (=had been) + the present participle (*base+ing*).

Subject	+had been	+verb + ing
I	had been	walking
Affirmative		
She	had been	trying
Negative		
She	hadn't been	sleeping

Subject	+had been	+verb + ing
Interrogative		
Had you	been	eating?
Interrogative negative		
Hadn't they	been	living?

To buy, past perfect continuous

Affirmative	Negative	Interrogative
I had been buying	I hadn't been buying	Had I been buying?
You had been buying	You hadn't been buying	Had you been buying?
She had been buying	She hadn't been buying	Had she been buying?
We had been buying	We hadn't been buying	Had we been buying?
They had been buying	They hadn't been buying	Had they been buying ?

Affirmative	Negative	Interrogative