

Verb Grammar

an analytic approach

English verb grammar is a bit like a set of building blocks. The verb forms consist of components that are visible in the name and reflect the function of the verbform. Important components are the present and past tenses, continuous or progressive and perfect aspect, passive voice. Because the last three are not tenses, it is argued that, as a result, forms like present continuous or past perfect are not tenses.

In this text, instead of just listing verb forms and the rules of when to use each form, first, the basic components that are the building blocks will be discussed, and then, how these explain the use of the verb forms and their compound names.

What these verb forms look like, how they are formed is explained in a separate handout, Conjugation of Verbs, Schematic.¹ Separating the verb form overview from the rules of when to use them was done because not all learners have difficulty with both aspects of verb grammar. There are quite a few that have difficulty with one but not with the other.

When in time

Verbs are about actions, states or situations. Actions happen and states or situations exist at a certain time, have a result at a certain time or are possible at a certain time. The time we live in is now, present. Now divides the rest of time in two parts, past and future. One aspect that seems to be forgotten is that one can think of actions or states as always existing. This is the case with facts or with things that are considered normal or background information.

Focus-Time

In a conversation or other communication, the time when an action happens or when a state is there often is the most important time. It is the time the speaker or writer wants to draw the attention to, wants to focus on, the **focus-time**. But, it can happen that the most important time is not the time when an action actually happens. Sometimes an action has an effect at a later time and for the speaker or writer this effect can be more important than the action itself. In such cases the **focus-time** is the time at which this more important result or effect of the action occurs.

Always, Past, Present and Future

Whether the verb is put in **simple always, past, present or future**, depends on the time the speaker wants to concentrate the attention on, wants to focus the attention on, the **focus-time**. To talk about the future a **possibility form** can be used. The same **possibility forms** are used to talk about possibilities now in another place. Only the first **verb** of the **predicate**, the verb part of a sentence, can show **focus-time** or **possibility form**. More about **possibility form** in the handout Possibility, Probability: not here, future, modal verbs.²

¹This handout can be downloaded for free from: <https://www.held.com.br/resources/>

²Conjugation of Verbs, Schematic <https://www.held.com.br/resources/Verbtenses-schematic-dwnld.html>

²Possibility, Probability: not here, future, modal verbs: (check here for availability) https://www.held.com.br/resources/PossibilityProbabilityFutureModals-Writing_State_Page.php

PresentI **walk**.I **am** going to work.I **am** not going to work.**Past**I **walked**.I **was** going to work.I **was** not going to work.not: I **am not went to work**.not: I **was not went to work**.

Enfos

PresentPeter **swims**.Melanie **is** swimming.Robert **does** not swim.**Past**Peter **swam**.Melanie **was** swimming.Robert **did** not swim.not: **Melanie doesn't swam**.not: **Robert didn't swam**.**Possibility Form**My neighbour **might** be swimming in the lake.

(The possibility exists now. If the swimming occurs it is now, in another place.)

not: **My neighbour might was swimming in the lake, yesterday**.Barney **could** fix the bicycle if he had the tools.

(The possibility exists from now into the future. The fixing can only happen in the future, under the condition of Barney having the tools.)

not: **Barney could fixed the bicycle if he had the tools**.The plumber **could** have been able to fix the washbasin if he hadn't been held up at the hardware store.

(The possibility existed in the past, not anymore. The fixing, in the past, is not possible anymore.)

not: **The plumber could had been able to fixed the washbasin if he hadn't been held up at the hardware store**.

Simple

Many grammar explanations and classes start with **simple**, which makes sense. They are much used forms and are simple in structure, consisting of only one **verb**. **Simple** can be used to talk about an action as a whole, as a complete action.

Other verb forms could be called compound forms. They consist of a **main verb** and one or more **auxiliary verbs**. The main verb indicates the activity or state communicated. **Auxiliary verbs** do not really have a meaning. The function they have is much more important. Their function is, giving additional information about the activity indicated by the **main verb**. Important examples of information they give are:

- Continuing over a certain period of time, going on, being in progress;
- Having happened in the past; the action or state itself being important or the result being more important;
- The possibility or probability of the existence of the action or state;

Now, Simple Always, Fact Form (Simple Present)

When talking about the present, about now, it doesn't make much sense to talk about an action as a whole, as a complete action. In most contexts, now is extremely short, too short to fit an

action that can be performed. This is easily verified with some simple thought experiments. Make sentences about now. Think about, talk about, now, about things you are doing now or that are happening now. Let me start with a cliché-like, over obvious one. Which of the following two sentences is best.

Now, you (the reader), are reading this text.
Now, you (the reader), read this text.

Enfos

To really notice how strange this is, you the reader, should say it about yourself, using first person singular. Which of the following sounds best, feels best.

I am reading this text.
I read this text.

If you are not yet familiar enough with English, It might not work for you. If that is the case, talk about it in your own language or another language that you are familiar with. In all the languages that I know, it works the same.

The thought experiment shows that, when talking about an action now **present continuous** or **durative** is used. It is also the reason I used **present continuous** to write down the task for the thought experiment, above.

So what about simple present. Well, it shouldn't be in grammar explanations. Regular grammar explanations show that the name simple present is illogical, that it is a misnomer. They say that simple present is used to talk about facts, about things that are normal, things that are always true and that for actions which are happening now, **present continuous** is used. For this reason instead of simple present a name should be chosen that fits the definition. A few suggestions are **simple always**, **fact form**. They are more logical and therefore make it easier to see when this verb form can be used. Using these names to teach my pupils, the improvement in their performance was clear to see.

Unfortunately neither name is really better than the other but using them together, side by side, they work well. In most cases, the name **simple always** makes it easy for learners to see when this verb form is good to use. The other name, **fact form**, is more accurate. In cases where the name **simple always** doesn't make things clear enough, the more accurate name **fact form** works well.

I **play** tennis.
(I do this normally. For instance every Wednesday and Friday at half past six in the evening.)

I **like** chocolate pudding.
(It is a matter of taste. Tastes are rather stable. What is someone's favourite food does not change every day.)

Water **freezes** at 0°C.
(This is a fact.)

Short lasting facts

The problem of neither **simple always** nor **fact form** being really good names is in part because some facts are time related, in some cases they are related to an extremely short period of time around the point in time of now.

It is cold now. Strange. All day it has been warm but now, all of a sudden, it is cold.
(It is a fact that from a very short time ago until now, the temperature is low, in contrast to the previous part of the day.)

Do you have some water for me? I am thirsty.
(It is a fact that, at this moment, I am thirsty and need to drink water.)

The name **fact form** is more accurate than **simple always**. Experience shows however that the name **simple always** is more helpful for learners to use the corresponding verb form appropriately. Therefore the suggestion to use both names until someone can come up with something better.

Communication problems because of illogical name

It is not uncommon for learners of English to use **simple always** (simple present) instead of **simple past**. They do not realise that this can cause rather problematic communication problems. Talking about yourself using **simple always** (simple present) with a verb that indicates an action, this can be interpreted as communicating your intentions. With a negative sentence it can be understood as, that you refuse to do something.

Learners who know **simple always** only by the name of simple present are not always aware of communication problems their mistakes may cause. See the following examples.

I **don't study** the irregular verb list.

(Saying this, a learner probably just wants to communicate it didn't happen. However, the sentence means that the learner seems to have a reason to not study it. It means that the learner has not done it and is not going to do it. The learner probably wanted to say:)

I **didn't study** the irregular verb list.

(This simply means it did not happen.)

I **don't read** that text.

(Same thing. This sentence means that the speaker has not read and is not going to read the text. It sounds like the speaker refuses to read it. Probably the learner just wanted to say:)

I **didn't read** that text.

(Likewise it simply means the reading of the text did not happen.)

It is amazing to see how learners improve performance in this aspect by learning the term **simple always** and why it is a better, more logical name than simple present.

Simple Past

To talk about actions as a whole, things that were normal or facts, in the past, **simple past** can be used.

When we **arrived** in Liverpool we quickly **found** a decent hotel.

In Europe, in the sixties, most people **didn't have** a telephone.

In the late nineties, many people **had** mobile phones.

How in time, time-factor, continuous

It is possible to indicate that an action or state is going on, that it is continuing for some time. This can be done by using **continuous**, a form that is sometimes referred to as, giving the verb a **Time-Factor**. In cases like the following, **continuous** is used.

- If an action is going on at the moment referred to, at the **focus time**.
- If for the speaker, the action lasts long.
- It can be used to indicate that the action is uninterrupted, that the action is continuing. That is why it is called **continuous**.
- It can also be used to indicate that an action was continuing until it was interrupted.
- Normally, to use **continuous**, there should be some kind of development or progress. That's why it is also called **progressive**.

The difference between **present continuous** and **past continuous** is shown by the **auxiliary verb** being in past or present.

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| I am playing tennis. | present continuous |
| Roberta is playing rugby. | present continuous |
| I was playing tennis. | past continuous |
| Roberta was playing rugby. | past continuous |

Present Continuous

I **am playing** tennis.
(Right now, I have the racket in my hand and ... wait ... I have to hit the ball!)

The actions are not necessarily uninterrupted. **Present continuous** can be used when an action is happening in this period of time, at certain intervals, but not necessarily right at this moment.

I **am reading** a book about the blues.
(Not right now. I'm not reading it at this very moment, but every evening and often at lunch, I read a bit in it. I started last week and I think I will finish it two weeks from now.)

Past Continuous

Saturday morning I was playing badminton. That is why I didn't answer my mobile.
As a matter of fact, I didn't even hear it ringing.

Until yesterday, I was reading the articles for the review I need to write. Now I can start writing.

Nonactions

Some **verbs** do not indicate actions but states. They are called **stative verbs**. Being states, sometimes called nonactions, there is no progress or development. It is there or it is not there at a certain time. Therefore, **stative verbs** are normally not placed in **continuous**.

Some verbs that normally indicate nonactions can also indicate actions.

I **think** this is a nice picture.
(It is my opinion. This is a nonaction.)

I **am thinking** of how to solve this problem.
(I am doing mental work. This is an action.)

In rare occasions, it does make sense to put nonactions like feelings or opinions in **continuous**. For using **continuous** most important is actually that it indicates something is temporarily present. This can be because it is different from normal.

Normally, I **don't like** science-fiction films but **am liking** this one.

So, always think first of what you want to say. First see if you want to indicate an action or a nonaction or a nonaction that is clearly temporarily. After that, apply the rules accordingly.

Two verbs in the past

When talking about two actions in the past, the verb forms can indicate how the actions are related to each other in time.

Simple Past - Past Continuous

When one **verb** is placed in **simple past** and the other in **past continuous**, it can mean two things. One possibility is that the action in **simple past** happened somewhere during the time of the action in **past continuous** but lasted much shorter. The other is that the action in **simple past** interrupted the action in **past continuous**.

I **was watching** a documentary about art when my daughter **came** in. She **asked** what their program was about and watched the rest with me.

Mr. Smith didn't kill Jacky Andrews. He **was robbing** a bank, fifteen kilometres away, when she **was** killed.

I **was reading** a magazine article when my brother **came** to pick me up.

Two verbs in Past Continuous

When both **verbs** are placed in **past continuous** this means both are going on at the same time.

When Jim **was cooking** dinner, Mary **was watching** volleyball.

Time period phrase, Past

Using **simple past** or **past continuous** with a time period phrase is similar.

Simple Past

Simple past together with time period phrase indicates that the action happened during some part of the mentioned period.

Yesterday evening I **watched** tv but not much. Only one program interested me.
(I watched tv only a part of the evening.)

Past Continuous

Past continuous together with time period phrase indicates that the action went on during the whole period.

Yesterday evening I **was watching** tv. I watched two very good films.
(I watched tv all evening.)

Perfect, action not at focus-time

As said before, sometimes you talk about an action or state but not because it is very important. What is actually more important is the result or effect that it has. The **focus-time** will be the time of the result or effect that you think is more important than the action itself when it happened. The action of course happens before the result you think is more important, before the **focus-time**. In such cases you can use **Perfect**.

Something that is perfect is hardly worth talking or even thinking about. What can one say about something that is perfect, just that it is what it is and that it is perfect. Something that's not perfect, that is what you can talk about a lot. It's like those two neighbours. The perfect one what can you say about him, that he's perfect. Now the one that is not perfect, that's the one you can talk and talk and talk about.

In verb-grammar it is similar. You place the verb in **Perfect** because it's not really interesting or important enough to talk about, it's not what you really want to talk about. You only mention the action because you actually want to communicate something else, the result of the action or state indicated by the verb. The easiest way to communicate this is by mentioning the action that caused it.

Perfect can be used to indicate that a certain action necessarily happened before another action or before a certain time. Reason can be that it is in the nature of the actions or because it has been set as a rule.

Present Perfect

Actions and states continuing until now

When talking about something that started in the past, continued until now and will probably continue into the future, **present perfect** is used in English.

Maybe you want to communicate that you know Berlin, that this is part of your experience, that you can talk about it. You can do that by using **present perfect**.
I **have visited** Berlin.

If someone asks you:

Why are you so tired?

You can say:

I have played football.

(Now people know the cause of you being so tired but the fact that you are so tired now is much more important than anything about when you were playing football.)

Infos

Two people come out of the cinema and one says to the other:

"Look, it **has rained**."

(Of course you cannot look back into the past and see the rain that was there while you were in the cinema. What you can see and what is most important is that everything outside is wet, as a result of the rain that must have been there.)

Difference between present perfect and simple past

What is the difference between the next two sentences?

Ben **has lived** in Rio de Janeiro for five years.

Ben **lived** in Rio de Janeiro for five years.

The first sentence with **present perfect** normally indicates that Ben still lives there. The second sentence with **simple past** means Ben doesn't live there any more.

Past Perfect

Past perfect is often used to indicate that an action necessarily happened before another action in the past or before a certain time in the past.

Past perfect with past

The action first in time is in **past perfect**. The action second in time, the one that only happens if the first one did, is in **simple past**.

When we were young we only **got** dessert if we **had eaten** all our vegetables.

The dog **was allowed** to go to the street when it **had received** its last vaccination.

I met Jill yesterday. She **was** exhausted. She **had worked** for 37 hours.

Past perfect with past-time-phrase

A verb in **past perfect** together with a past-time-phrase means the action of this verb happened before the mentioned time.

Why didn't you apply for the job you wanted so much?

When, on Thursday, I finally found the information about the application, I saw that applications **were accepted** only **until Tuesday**.

Some flexibility

There is no rigid relation between the facts of the actions and the verb forms you can use. There is some flexibility allowing you to communicate what you think of the facts. In different contexts a same verb form can have different meanings.

Examples, Present Perfect

Look at this phrase with **past perfect**.

... **has lived** in Rio for seven years.

It has different meanings in the following two contexts.

Context 1.

A) - The heavy traffic and all the noise of Rio doesn't seem to bother Julia, does it?

B) - Not really. She **has lived** in Rio for seven years. She's gotten used to it.

In this context it means that Julia came to live in Rio seven years ago and is still living here. Living in Rio for so long made that she got used to the heavy traffic and the noise so it doesn't bother her anymore.

Context 2.

A) - My son, John, is really looking forward to his trip to Rio with Peter. But I'm afraid it may be difficult for them to get to the places they want to visit by car.

B) - Don't worry, Peter **has lived** in Rio for seven years. It is only one year that he moved here. He still knows his way around there.

Here it means that Peter used to live in Rio. He is not living there anymore but he has lived there for a period of seven years. That's why he knows the city well. He can find his way around. Although he doesn't live in Rio anymore, the time that he did live there gave him experience and knowledge of the city, which is useful now.

Examples, Present Perfect - Present Perfect Continuous

On two occasions, someone needs to return a book to you. The circumstances are the same. You agree to meet in a café. Both make you wait for 45 minutes. On arrival the person says:

Oh, I'm glad you're still here.

You can reply:

I **have waited** for you.

You can also reply:

I **have been waiting** for you.

If it is a good friend of yours you will probably say:

I **have waited** for you.

Like this, using **past perfect**, you just give the reason you're still there.

If it is for instance a fellow-student you actually don't like too much. You may say:

I **have been waiting** for you.

By using **past perfect continuous**, you show that you think it took him a long time to arrive and that you didn't like having to wait that much.

Recognising verb forms

The order in which the above described elements are presented in the names of the verb form is the same order as in which they appear in the sentence. By recognising the elements you can recognise the verb form.

Example: past perfect continuous

It *had been raining* a lot, the weeks before we went camping.

Working from back to front.

Continuous: *been raining*, auxiliary verb *to be* plus present participle (verb-ing) of main verb *raining*.

Perfect: *had been*, auxiliary verb *to have* plus past participle of other verb. Because of continuous, the verb *to be* has the past participle form *been*.

Past: *had* is the past of *to have*.

Exercise

Which verb forms do the following sentences have.

I've lived in the Bahamas for 5 years.

I work in Baltimore.

She is working at IBM at the moment.

Mary was going to the supermarket when she saw Barry.

The children were playing outside when their father was preparing dinner.

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