

The verb system poses a significant challenge for both native and nonnative speakers of English, and using the appropriate verb form and tense is an important element in becoming an effective academic writer. Tense is the form of a verb that indicates time and can be classified as **present**, **past**, and **future**. In addition, each tense has **simple**, **perfect**, **progressive**, and **perfect progressive** verb forms to indicate the time span of the actions taking place. For each time frame (present, past, and future), auxiliary or helping verbs are used with the base verb to convey completed actions (perfect forms), actions in progress (progressive forms), and actions that are completed by some specified time or event and emphasize the length of time in progress (perfect progressive forms).

With the exception of the verb “**be**,” all verbs in Standard English have five main forms:

- the **base** or the form listed in a dictionary
- the “**-s**” form or the third person singular form of the **present tense**
- the **past tense**, which functions as a complete verb without the use of auxiliary verbs
- the “**-ing**” form or the **present participle**, used with a form of the verb “**be**” to form the progressive tenses
- the **past participle**, often called the “**-ed/en**” form, used with “**have**,” “**has**,” or “**had**” to form the perfect tenses

SIMPLE TENSES

The simple tenses indicate relatively simple time relations: the **simple present**, the **simple past**, and the **simple future**.

Simple Present

The simple present tense is used primarily for actions occurring at the moment, regularly, or at a set time in the future. It is formed by using the base verb or the base verb with “**-s**” or “**-es**” and can be singular (I **listen**, you **listen**, s/he/it **listen**) or plural (we **listen**, you **listen**, they **listen**). When the verb is irregular, be sure to use the proper form of the verb; for example, with the irregular verb “**be**,” use the following: singular (I **am**, you **are**, s/he/it **is**); plural (we, you, they **are**).

I **listen** to music whenever I have the opportunity.
Is it true that you **listen** to music for two hours each night?
My sister told me that she **listens** to music for relaxation.

I **am** too old to make what has become a difficult journey.
She **is** ready for the next question.

We **are** going in the wrong direction to the airport.

Simple Past

The simple past tense is used for actions completed in the past. With regular verbs, it is formed by using the base verb with “-ed” and like all tenses can be singular (I **lived**, you **lived**, s/he/it **lived**) or plural (we **lived**, you **lived**, they **lived**). With irregular verbs, the base verb is not formed with “-ed,” for example, the simple past tense for the base verb “buy” would be “bought”: singular (I, you, s/he/it **bought**); plural (we, you, they **bought**).

I **lived** in San Juan before I moved to New York.
He **walked** to the concert instead of taking the train.
They **bought** a new table at the furniture store.

Simple Future

The simple future tense is used for actions that will occur in the future. It is formed by using “will” and the base verb (I, you s/he/it, we, they **will complete**).

I **will complete** my undergraduate degree next semester.
Do you know when he **will return** to the office?
They **will return** to the same nesting place each winter.

PERFECT TENSES

The perfect tenses express an action that was or will be completed at the time of another action and are formed with “have,” “has,” or “had” plus the past participle (“-ed/en”) of the base verb: the **present perfect**, the **past perfect**, and the **future perfect**.

Present Perfect

The present perfect tense is used to indicate that an action occurring at some unstated time in the past is related or continues to the present time. It is formed by using “have” or “has” plus the past participle of the base verb (I, you, we, they **have lived**; s/he/it **has lived**).

I **have lived** in this apartment since I graduated from college.
My neighbor **has registered** to vote in the next election.
They **have gone** to the deli across the street to get lunch.

Past Perfect

The past perfect tense is used when one past event was completed before another past event or stated past time. It is formed by using “had” plus the past participle of the base verb (I, you, s/he/it, we, they **had forgotten**).

Someone **had forgotten** to lock the door.
He **had arrived** before we got there.
After the guests **had gone**, I went to bed.

Future Perfect

The future perfect tense is used to indicate an action that will be completed before another time or event in the future. It is formed by using “**will**” plus “**have**” and the past participle of the base verb.

By the time I see you, I **will have graduated**.
She **will have completed** the assignment earlier than expected.
When they finally arrive, they **will have travelled** for more than ten hours.

PROGRESSIVE TENSES

The progressive tenses take a form of the verb “**be**” (**am, are, is, was, were**) plus the present participle of the base verb: the **present progressive**, the **past progressive**, and the **future progressive**.

Present Progressive

The present progressive tense is used to indicate an action in progress at the moment of speaking. It is formed by using “**am,**” “**are,**” or “**is**” with the present participle of the base verb (I **am**, you **are**, s/he/it **is**, we, they **are**).

Juanita **is sleeping** in the next room.
I need an umbrella because it **is raining**.
Both of the instructors **are planning** to meet with the student.

Past Progressive

The past progressive tense is used for an activity that was in progress over time or at a specified point in the past. It is formed by using “**was,**” or “**were**” with the present participle of the base verb.

I **was walking** down the street when it began to rain.
During the intermission, she **was talking** to her friend from school.
Last year at this time, they **were preparing** to volunteer at the conference.

Future Progressive

The future progressive tense is used for an activity that is expected to be in progress at a time in the future when something else will happen. It is formed by using “**will**” plus “**be**” or a form of

the verb “**be**” plus “**going to be**” with the present participle of the base verb (I, you s/he/it, we, they **will be studying**).

I **will be studying** until the beginning of class.

At this same time tomorrow, I **will be waiting** for you in the lobby.

I **am going to be sending** you my resume.

PERFECT PROGRESSIVE TENSES

The perfect progressive tenses take “**have**” plus a form of “**be**” plus the verb and indicate an action that takes place over a specific period of time: the **present perfect progressive**, the **past perfect progressive**, and the **future perfect progressive**.

Present Perfect Progressive

The present perfect progressive tense describes actions that start in the past and continue to the present. It is formed by using “**have**” or “**has**” plus “**been**” plus the present participle of the base verb (I, you, we, they **have been sitting**, s/he/it **has been sitting**).

I **have been sitting** at my desk all morning.

You **have been studying** for five hours.

Since she came home from school, she **has been watching** television.

Past Perfect Progressive

The past perfect progressive tense is used to indicate actions that ended or will end at a specified time or before another action. It is formed by using “**had**” plus “**been**” plus the present participle of the base verb (I, you, s/he/it, we, they **had been looking**).

I **had been looking** for the recipe since early this morning.

It **had been sitting** on the shelf for many, many years.

They **had been waiting** for a visit from their grandchildren.

Future Perfect Progressive

Similar to the past perfect progressive tense, the future perfect progressive tense is used to indicate actions that ended or will end at a specified time or before another action. It is formed by using “**will**” plus “**have**” plus “**been**” plus the present participle of the base verb (I, you, s/he/it, we, they **will have been teaching**), for example, “When Professor Jones retires next month, he **will have been teaching** for 45 years.”