

ENGLISH GRAMMAR

A GUIDE TO THE PRESENT PERFECT
AND PAST PERFECT TENSES
IN BRITISH ENGLISH

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Introduction

Why are the present and past perfect tenses so difficult? This is a regular question and one which comes up again and again in my teaching practice. The truth is however, they are very easy to understand but they have a reputation for being one of the most difficult things to comprehend. Part of the reason why these tenses look difficult is because they don't exist in many languages.

The aim of this booklet is to unfold these tenses by explaining them, comparing them and giving examples of how to use them in everyday English. As you will see, these tenses are incredibly simple but you need to understand why these tenses exist, before you can begin to use them.

So, without further hesitation lets begin to use the present and past perfect tenses. I think you will be surprised just how easy they are!

The present and past perfect tenses

Put simply, these tenses exist to talk about things outside of time and for things which cannot be described by time (such as love, faith, experience etc).

Imagine for one moment that the **past tense** is an archive of historical events with times and dates of when an activity took place. Each item is marked separately.

Past tense examples

On Monday, I went to the cinema

Here the person is describing what action took place on Monday.

This may be part of a wider discussion such as-

On Monday, I went to the cinema

On Tuesday I went to work

On Wednesday I visited Jane

All of the above examples can be used to answer the question-

What did you do last week?

However there needs to be a way that we can talk about things away from dates and times. A way we can communicate emotion and feeling to describe an event without asking when it happened and to talk about events which repeat regularly.

The present and past perfect tenses are also ways in which we can talk about things outside of time or about something which cannot be affected by time (love, joy, peace happiness, experience and non material things)

Consider the following:-

John and Jane have a friend called Peter, whom everybody hates. Peter and John had a fight and now they are bitter mortal enemies. The conversation was something like this-

Jane- *“John, you need to talk to Peter and try to become friends again”*

John- *“there’s no way”*

Jane- *“please try....”*

A few days later, John said to Jane-

“I have spoken to Peter”

Here is your first example of the **Present Perfect**, a statement which exists outside of time. Its truly not important when John spoke to Peter. He simply wants to say that its been done, that the action is complete. Talking about (the action of) speaking with Peter was more important than saying when it happened. Jane doesn’t care when he spoke to Peter, she only wants to know that they are friends again.

The above is one of the uses of the **present perfect tense**. There are many others which mainly focus on “**outside of time**” the same as the one above. We will look at these shortly.

“**Have you ever been in love?**” is a line from many movies and love songs around the world. It would seem strange in English to ask “**were you in love in 2001**” or to try and say love is something which can be fenced into a time or date. This is another example of the way in which we use the Present Perfect outside of time.

Although you can't use time with present or past perfect, you can use duration:

They've been here since last month.
I've worked here since I left school.
I've been listening to that programme every week since it started.

My last birthday was the worst day I have ever had.

Have you ever met Joe?
Yes, but I've never met his brother.

for something that happened in the past but is important at the time of speaking:

I've lost my keys.
Tom isn't here I think he has gone shopping.

The construction for the present perfect tense is-

(verb to have) + past participle

e.g. I have taught, he has lived, we have spoken

Now let us look at examples using the **Past Perfect-**

“I have worked as a graphic designer for 20 years, before that, **I had worked** as a Radio presenter”.

The past perfect exists for things which are further back in history than the present perfect. So it exists to compare things to the present perfect in time.

For example-

“I have taught children for 15 yeas but before that **I had taught** adults”.

The construction for the past perfect tense is-

(verb “to have” in its past form) + past participle

The **past perfect** is not generally used alone, but only to refer to things which happened before the present perfect. You are unlikely to hear **“I had lived in England”** unless it is part of a larger sentence which says **“I have lived in Spain and before that I had lived in England”**.

As discussed earlier, the **perfect tenses** are also used to talk about non material things which are not confined by time. We need to use it when talking about changes over time, experiences, growth, faith, love and regret.

Life Experiences:

I have been to France before that **I had been** to Russia

Changes over a period of Time

The Government **has become** much better in recent years, I remember in the 1970's **it had built** a number of power plants which never worked.

Statements of love

I have loved

The continuous forms of the Present and Past Perfect Tenses

We use the Present Perfect Continuous to show that something begun in the past and has continued up until now. "For ten minutes," "for six weeks," and "since Friday" are all examples can be used with the Present Perfect Continuous.

Examples:

- They **have been building that house** for the last year.
- She **has been working on that project** at that company for three years.
- What **have you been doing** ?
- Joe **has been teaching** at the university since January.
- We **have been waiting** for that parcel for over 10 days

Some people also say “how are you doing” instead of “how are you”

Recently, Lately

You can also use the **Present Perfect Continuous** without a duration such as "for a month." Without the duration, the tense has a more general meaning of "lately." We often use the words "lately" or "recently" to emphasize the meaning.

Actions that have just or almost finished,

She has been eating since last night.

It's been raining

Someone's been shouting in the streets

SUMMARY

Present perfect

'have' / 'has' + the past participle

Present perfect continuous

'have' / 'has' + the present participle

Past perfect

'had' + the past participle

Past perfect (continuous)

'had' + the present participle