

MPC English & Study Skills Center

Verbs/Verb Tenses

Verbs in a sentence supply the actions that are happening and give a sense of the time frame in which those actions occur. There are about thirty verb tenses in English, but this handout discusses the basic twelve tenses in the **active voice** (subject is doing the action) and also briefly discusses those tenses in the **passive voice** (subject is receiving the action), as well as some **other** verb forms, such as **modal** and **phrasal** verbs. A sentence may have one single verb or a combination of verb forms.

Verb tenses are grouped into four major categories, based on the period of time over which the action takes place: **simple**, **progressive**, **perfect**, and **perfect progressive**. Each group, in turn, has three different times the action can happen: **present**, **past**, and **future**.

Verb Forms

There are two basic types of verbs (**regular** and **irregular**) and **five forms** that each type can take. An exception is the verb **be**, which is highly irregular and has eight forms: *be, am, are, is, was, were, been, and being*.

Regular verbs:

‡ All make the past tense by adding **-d** or **-ed**: walked, hurried, talked, worked, etc.

Present (Base Form)	Past	Past Participle	Present Participle	S-form
talk	talked	talked	talking	talks
help	helped	helped	helping	helps

Irregular verbs:

‡ All make the past tense in a variety of ways: ran, bought, taught, drove, ate, etc.

Present (Base Form)	Past	Past Participle	Present Participle	S-form
give	gave	given	giving	gives
eat	ate	eaten	eating	eats

‡ The present participle and past participle do not act as verbs without a helping or auxiliary verb. There is also another form, the **infinitive**, which is formed by adding **to** in front of the base form (**to + verb**), but the infinitive is never part of the verb in a sentence; it has other uses.

‡ The **S-form** is used only in the present tense for 3rd person singular action; see the example under **Simple Tenses**.

Verb Tenses

Simple Tenses: Verb

Since "simple" means easy, these are the easiest tenses, used to show actions at a point in time. It is made of one verb, not counting "will," which is added on for future time.

- **Simple present:** I teach English. (**S-form:** She teaches English.)
- **Simple past:** I taught English.
- **Simple future:** I will teach English.

Note: **Be + going + to + verb** is an idiomatic form of the future. It can be used to indicate plans (not promises) in the near future:

I am going to go to the movies tonight. (plan)
I will marry you. (promise)

Progressive Tenses: Be + verb + -ing

The progressive tenses are used to show continuing or ongoing actions. The progressive is made of two parts: a form of **be** (is, am, are, was, were) and the present participle (**verb + -ing**).

- **Present Progressive:** He is working.
- **Past Progressive:** He was working.
- **Future Progressive:** He will be working.

Perfect Tenses: Have + Past Participle

The perfect tenses are used to show actions that occur in a period of time rather than at a point in time. The perfect tenses are made of two parts: a form of **have** (have, has, had) and the past participle.

- **Present Perfect:** She has studied all week for this test.
- **Past Perfect:** She had studied all night before she took the test.
- **Future Perfect:** She will have studied before she takes the test tomorrow.

Perfect Progressive Tenses: Have been + verb + -ing

The perfect progressive tenses are used to show actions that continue over a period of time rather than at a point in time. They are made of a combination of the perfect and the progressive.

Have + past participle of **be** + present participle (**verb + -ing**)
Have **been** **playing**.

- **Present Perfect Progressive:** They have been playing.
- **Past Perfect Progressive:** They had been playing.
- **Future Perfect Progressive:** They will have been playing.

Passive Voice: Tense + be + past participle

‡ The twelve tenses above are given in the **active voice**; that is, the subject does the action of the verb.

Tom **kicked** the ball. *Who kicked it? Tom did.*

‡ The twelve tenses all have a **passive voice** as well, and the passive has a slightly different structure.

‡ In the passive voice, the subject stands by passively while someone or something else does something to it. Only verbs with direct objects have a passive form.

The ball **was kicked** by the man. *The ball doesn't do a thing.*

‡ In order to determine tense in the passive voice, just ignore the past participle at the end, and the sequence that remains determines the tense.

...letter is written...
Delete "written": ...letter is... (present tense)

Tense	Active Voice	Passive Voice
Simple		
• Present	Tom writes a letter.	The letter is written by Tom.
• Past	Tom wrote a letter.	The letter was written by Tom.
• Future	Tom will write a letter.	The letter will be written by Tom.
Progressive		
• Present	Tom is writing a letter.	A letter is being written by Tom.
• Past	Tom was writing a letter.	A letter was being written by Tom.
• Future	Tom will be writing a letter.	A letter will be being written by Tom.
Perfect		
• Present	Tom has written a letter.	A letter has been written by Tom.
• Past	Tom had written a letter.	A letter had been written by Tom.
• Future	Tom will have written a letter.	A letter will have been written by Tom.
Perfect Progressive		
• Present	Tom has been writing a letter.	A letter has been being written by Tom.
• Past	Tom had been writing a letter.	A letter had been being written by Tom.
• Future	Tom will have been writing a letter.	A letter will have been being written by Tom.

Note: While it is possible to change all of the tenses into the passive voice, realistically the resulting structure is often quite awkward.

Other Verb Structures

Modals: Modal Verb

Modal is the term for a specific group of **helping** or **auxiliary** verbs. There are nine true modals:

- can, could
- shall, should
- will, would
- may, might, must

‡ A modal cannot be a verb by itself; it must be followed by the simple base form of the verb. Modals indicate time, but in a different way than the normal tenses. **For example:**

I **can work** for you.

This can mean right now, or it can refer to the future.

I **could work** for you.

*This can refer to the past, or it can refer to now when used to suggest a possibility, as in this sentence: I **could work** for you if I wanted to, but I don't.*

‡ Modals are quite complicated. For now, one should recognize that the modal is part of the verb and the other verb forms that follow it are also part of the verb. The sense of the sentence or time words indicate the time of the modal verb, except for those with "will," which is used to indicate future time or promises. **Examples:**

I **might have gone**, but you didn't ask me.

They **should have studied** harder.

He **must** not **tell** her what I said.

Phrasal Verbs (two-part verbs)

Sometimes verbs are combined with what looks like a preposition to make one meaning. For example, "on" is usually a preposition, as in "The book is **on** the table."

"On" is used to tell where the book is located, and "on the table" is the complete prepositional phrase. However, this sentence is different: I turned **on** the light.

At first glance, it appears that "on the light" is a prepositional phrase, but it has nothing to do with location in space. There is nothing "on the light." Here, "on" is part of the verb and must be considered part of the action "turned on." There are many phrasal verbs in English. They can occur joined or separated.

- I **looked up** the word. I **looked** the word **up**.
- He **turned down** the TV. He **turned** the TV **down**.
- Tim **stood** his wife **up**.
- Jorge **looked** the truck **over** before he bought it.
- Stefan **handed in** his paper. He **handed** the paper **in**.

Note: See *also* the related handouts on **Consistent Verb Tense, **Verb Tense: Talking about the Past**, **Modals**, and **Conditionals**.**