

## Present simple

Or simple present.

- Affirmative: *I write; He writes*
- Negative: *He does not write*
- Interrogative: *Does he write?*
- Negative interrogative: *Does he not write?*

Note that the "simple present" in idiomatic English often identifies habitual or customary action:

*He writes about beavers* (understanding that he does so *all of the time*.)

It is used with stative verbs:

*She thinks that beavers are remarkable*

It can also have a future meaning (though much less commonly than in many other languages):

*She goes to Milwaukee on Tuesday.*

Put *Tuesday* in the plural, and *she goes to Milwaukee on Tuesdays* means that she goes to Milwaukee *every* Tuesday.

The present simple has an intensive or emphatic form with "do": *He does write*. In the negative and interrogative forms, of course, this is identical to the non-emphatic forms. It is typically used as a response to the question *Does he write*, whether that question is expressed or implied, and says that indeed, he does write.

The different syntactic behavior of the [negative](#) particle *not* and the negative inflectional suffix *-n't* in the interrogative form is also worth noting. In formal [literary English](#) of the sort in which contractions are avoided, *not* attaches itself to the main verb: *Does he not write?* When the colloquial contraction *-n't* is used, this attaches itself to the auxiliary *do*: *Doesn't he write?* This in fact is a contraction of a more archaic word order, still occasionally found in poetry: *\*Does not he write?*

## Present progressive

Or present continuous.

- Affirmative: *He is writing*
- Negative: *He is not writing*
- Interrogative: *Is he writing?*
- Negative interrogative: *Is he not writing?*

This form describes the simple engagement in a present activity, with the focus on action in progress "at this very moment". It too can indicate a future, particularly when discussing plans already in place: *I am flying to Paris tomorrow*. Used with "always" it suggests irritation; compare *He always does that* (neutral) with *He is always doing that*. Word order differs here in the negative interrogative between the hyper formal *is he not writing* and the usual *isn't he writing?*

## Present perfect

Traditionally just called the perfect.

- Affirmative: *He has written*
- Negative: *He has not written*
- Interrogative: *Has he written?*
- Negative interrogative: *Has he not written?*

This indicates that a past event has one of a range of possible relationships to the present. This may be a focus on present result: *He has written a very fine book* (and look, here it is, we have it now). Or it may indicate a time-frame which includes the present. *I have lived here since my youth* (and I still do). Compare: *Have you written a letter this morning?* (it is still morning) with *Did you write a letter this morning?* (it is now afternoon). The perfect tenses are frequently used with the adverbs *already* or *recently* or with *since* clauses. Although the label “perfect tense” implies a completed action, the present perfect can identify habitual (*I have written letters since I was ten years old.*) or continuous (*I have lived here for fifteen years.*) action.

In addition to these normal uses where the time frame either is the present or includes the present, the “have done” construct is used in temporal clauses to define a future time: *When you have written it, show it to me.* It also forms a perfect infinitive, used when infinitive constructions require a past perspective: *Mozart is said to have written his first symphony at the age of eight.* (Notice that if not for the need of an infinitive, the simple past would have been used here: *He wrote it at age eight.*) The past infinitive is also used in the [conditional perfect](#).

## Present perfect progressive

Or continuous.

- Affirmative: *He has been writing*
- Negative: *He has not been writing*
- Interrogative: *Has he been writing?*
- Negative interrogative: *Has he not been writing?*

Used for unbroken action in the past which continues right up to the present. *I have been writing this paper all morning* (and still am).

Present Perfect Continuous is used for denoting the action which was in progress and has just finished (a) or is still going on (b). For example,

- a) Why are your eyes red? – I have been crying since morning. (The action has already finished but was in progress for some time)
- b) She has been working here for two years already and she is happy. (The action is still in progress).

If we have to ask a question with “How long..?” we should use the present perfect continuous. For example,

How long have you been working here?

But with stative words (such as see, want, like, etc), or if the situation is considered permanent, we should use the present perfect simple. For example,

I have known her since childhood.

If we talk about the whole period of time, we use “for” and when we talk about the starting point of the action, we use “since”.

We should not use the present simple tense for denoting actions that began in the past and are still going on. For example,

I am ill since Monday. (It is not correct).

I have been ill since Monday. (It is correct).

## Past simple

Or preterite. In older textbooks often called the imperfect.

- Affirmative: *He wrote*
- Negative: *He did not write*
- Interrogative: *Did he write?*
- Negative interrogative: *Did he not write?*

The same change of word order in the negative interrogative that distinguishes the formal and informal register also applies to the preterite. Note also that the preterite form is also used only in the affirmative. When the sentence is recast as a negative or interrogative, *he wrote not* and *wrote he?* are archaic and not used in modern English. They must instead be supplied by periphrastic forms.

This tense is used for a single event in the past, sometimes for past habitual action, and in chronological narration. Like the present simple, it has emphatic forms with "do": *he did write*.

Although it is sometimes taught that the difference between the present perfect and the simple past is that the perfect denotes a completed action whereas the past denotes an incomplete action, this theory is clearly false. Both forms are normally used for completed actions. (Indeed the English preterite comes from the [Proto-Indo-European](#) perfect.) And either can be used for incomplete actions. The real distinction is that the present perfect is used when the time frame either is the present or includes the present, whereas the simple past is used when the time frame is in the absolute past.

The "used to" past tense for habitual actions is probably best included under the bracket of the past simple. Compare:

*When I was young I played football every Saturday.*

*When I was young I used to play football every Saturday.*

The difference is slight, but "used to" stresses the regularity, and the fact that the action has been discontinued.

## Past continuous

Or imperfect or past progressive.

- Affirmative: *He was writing*
- Negative: *He was not writing*
- Interrogative: *Was he writing?*
- Negative interrogative: *Was he not writing?*

This is typically used for two events in parallel:

*While I was washing the dishes my wife was walking the dog.*

Or for an interrupted action (the past simple being used for the interruption):

*While I was washing the dishes I heard a loud noise.*

Or when we are focusing on a point in the middle of a longer action:

*At three o'clock yesterday I was working in the garden. (Contrast: I worked in the garden all day yesterday.)*

## **Past perfect**

Or the "pluperfect"

- Affirmative: *He had written*
- Negative: *He had not written*
- Interrogative: *Had he written?*
- Negative interrogative: *Had he not written?*

## **Past perfect progressive**

Or "pluperfect progressive" or "continuous"

- Affirmative: *He had been writing*
- Negative: *He had not been writing*
- Interrogative: *Had he been writing?*
- Negative interrogative: *Had he not been writing?*

Relates to the past perfect much as the present perfect progressive relates to the present perfect, but tends to be used with less precision.

## **Future simple**

- Affirmative: *He will write*
- Negative: *He will not write*
- Interrogative: *Will he write?*
- Negative interrogative: *Will he not write?*

See the article [Shall and Will](#) for a discussion of the two auxiliary verbs used to form the simple future in English. There is also a future with "go" which is used especially for intended actions, and for the weather, and generally is more common in colloquial speech:

*I am going to write a book some day.  
I think that it is going to rain.*

But the will future is preferred for spontaneous decisions:

*Jack: "I think that we should have a barbecue!"*

*Jill: "Good idea! I shall go get the coal."*

## **Future progressive**

- Affirmative: *He will be writing*
- Negative: *He will not be writing*
- Interrogative: *Will he be writing?*
- Negative interrogative: *Will he not be writing?*

Used especially to indicate that an event will be in progress at a particular point in the future:  
*This time tomorrow I will be taking my driving test.*

## **Future perfect**

- Affirmative: *He will have written*
- Negative: *He will not have written*
- Interrogative: *Will he have written?*
- Negative interrogative: *Will he not have written?*

Used for something which will be completed by a certain time (perfect in the literal sense) or which leads up to a point in the future which is being focused on.

*I will have finished my essay by Thursday.*

*By then she will have been there for three weeks.*

## **Future perfect progressive**

Or future perfect continuous.

- Affirmative: *He will have been writing*
- Negative: *He will not have been writing*
- Interrogative: *Will he have been writing?*
- Negative interrogative: *Will he not have been writing?*

## **Conditional**

Or past subjunctive.

- Affirmative: *He would write*
- Negative: *He would not write*
- Interrogative: *Would he write?*
- Negative interrogative: *Would he not write?*

Used principally in a main clause accompanied by an implicit or explicit doubt or "if-clause"; may refer to conditional statements in present or future time:

*I would like to pay now if it is not too much trouble.* (in present time; doubt of possibility is explicit)

*I would like to pay now.* (In present time; doubt is implicit)

*I would do it if she asked me.* (in future time; doubt is explicit)

*I would do it.* (In future time; doubt is implicit)

(A very common error by foreign learners is to put the *would* into the if-clause itself. A humorous formulation of the rule for the EFL classroom runs: "If and *would* you never should, if and *will* makes teacher ill!" But of course, both *will* and *would* CAN occur in an if-clause when expressing volition. A student of English may rarely encounter the incorrect construction as it can occur as an archaic form.)

## Conditional perfect

Or pluperfect subjunctive/past-perfect subjunctive.

- Affirmative: *He would have written*
- Negative: *He would not have written*
- Interrogative: *Would he have written?*
- Negative interrogative: *Would he not have written?*

Used as the past tense of the conditional form; expresses thoughts which are or may be contrary to present fact:

*I would have set an extra place if I had known you were coming.* (fact that an extra place was not set is implicit; conditional statement is explicit)

*I would have set an extra place, but I did not because Mother said you were not coming.* (fact that a place was not set is explicit; conditional is implicit)

*I would have set an extra place.* (Fact that a place was not set is implicit, conditional is implicit)

## Conditional perfect progressive

- Affirmative: *He would have been writing*
- Negative: *He would not have been writing*
- Interrogative: *Would he have been writing?*
- Negative interrogative: *Would he not have been writing?*

## Present subjunctive

The form is always identical to the infinitive. This means that, apart from the verb "to be", it is distinct only in the third person singular and the obsolete second person singular.

- Indicative: *I write, thou writest, he writes, I am*
- Subjunctive: *I write, thou write, he write, I be*

Used to refer to situations which are or may be contrary to fact in the present or future; the infactuality is rarely explicit:

*I insist that he come at once.* (Present time; fact that the action is not currently occurring is implicit)

*I insist that he come when I call.* (Future time; fact that the action may or may not occur is implicit)

(The present subjunctive is often interchangeable with the past subjunctive like so: *I insist that he must come at once.*)

## **Imperfect subjunctive**

The use of the old term "imperfect" shows that this form is so rare that it has not been integrated into the modern system of English tense classification. The imperfect subjunctive is identical to the past simple in every verb except the verb "to be". With this verb, there is an option, but no longer a necessity, of using *were* throughout all forms (i.e., *I wish I were an wiener*, vs. [I wish I was a girl](#)).

- Indicative: *I was*
- Traditional Subjunctive: *I were*
- Colloquial Subjunctive: *I was*
  
- *If I were rich, I would retire to the South of France.*