

LUC WRITING CENTER – “VERB TENSES OVERVIEW”

There are twelve distinct tenses in English, and each tense is formed using a combination of verbs and auxiliary (also called helping) verbs. The variety of these combinations allows English verbs to describe very precisely how two or more events relate to one another in time. Each combination of helping verbs can state when something happened, as well as if that action is ongoing or if it has been completed.

Simple Tenses	Use this tense when describing actions that occur at a particular time.	Example Verb
Simple Present	Describes events that usually, habitually, and always exist. Ex. The water in Lake Michigan is cold.	I eat
Simple Past	Describes events that occurred in the past and were completed in the past. Ex. Last summer I walked to Lake Michigan.	I ate
Simple Future	Describes events that will occur at a particular time in the future. Ex. Next summer I will swim in Florida.	I will eat
Progressive (or Continuous) Tenses	Use this tense when describing actions that are in progress during a particular time.	Example Verb Form (form of to be + present participle)
Present Progressive	Describes events that are in progress at the present time, and probably will continue. Ex. I am riding my bike right now.	I am eating.
Past Progressive	Describes events that began before and were in progress at a specific time in the past. Ex. By the time I arrived at the park, she was riding her bike.	I was eating.
Future Progressive	Describes events that will be in progress at a specific time in the future.	I will be eating.

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	Ex. When you get to the park, she will be riding her bike.	
Perfect Tenses	Use this tense when describing an action that is completed before another time or event occurs.	Example Verb Form (form of to have + past participle)
Present Perfect		I have eaten.
Past Perfect		I had eaten.
Future Perfect		I will have eaten.
Progressive Tenses	Use this tense when describing the duration of an action that is in progress before, until, or up to another event.	Example Verb Form (form of to have + been + present participle.
Present Perfect Progressive	Describes an event that is in progress up until the present. Ex. He has been walking the dog for half an hour.	I have been eating.
Past Perfect Progressive	Describes an even that was in progress up until another event in the past. Ex. He had been walking the dog before it started to rain.	I had been eating.
Future Perfect Progressive	Describes an event that will be in progress until another event in the future. Ex. By the time she gets home from work, he will have been walking the dog for an hour.	I will have been eating.

Some Further Helpful Rules for Choosing Tenses:

I. When the main clause of a sentence is in the present, present perfect, or future tense, the subordinate clause takes a present tense verb. Ex. When I get to the party, I will see my friends.

II. When the main clause of a sentence is in the past or past perfect tense, the subordinate clause takes a past tense verb. Ex. My puppy had chewed my slippers while I was at work.

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How to Notice and Correct Any Errors:

- III. Look for instances when your sentences are describing multiple events that happen at different times. Rather than using the same tense to describe each event, it is more likely that you should use multiple tenses to accurately portray when the events occurred.
- IV. Evaluate the verbs you use to make sure they accurately and consistently portray the temporal relationship between the events being discussed.
- V. Reading your sentences out loud can sometimes be an effective tool for recognizing verb tense errors.

These materials were partially adapted from the following:

Garner, Bryan. *Garner's Modern American Usage*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
Understanding and Using English Grammar. 4th ed. Ed. Betty S. Azar and Stacy A. Hagen.
Pearson Longman, 2009.

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