

## LUC WRITING CENTER – “VERB TENSES AS INDICATORS OF TIME”

### The Rules:

English verbs use different tenses to describe when an event occurred. Each tense uses auxiliary verbs (also called “helping verbs” or “modal verbs”) to precisely describe whether an action is ongoing or completed, and whether that action occurred in the past, present, or future.

*To make things more complicated, verb tenses also describe how different events relate to each other in time.*

I. Progressive (or continuous tenses) describe actions **that are in progress, or occur over a duration, at a particular time.**

*Examples:*

1. The bird was flying back and forth to its nest all day (the past progressive *was flying* indicates that the bird’s movement occurred over a duration of time: *all day*).
2. By cooking your own meals, you are also being creative (the present progressive *are being* indicates that whenever the cooking occurs, the cook’s creativity is generally, or universally true).

II. Perfect tenses are used to describe action **that were completed, or entirely finished, relative to another action.**

*Examples:*

1. He has already eaten his lunch (the present perfect *has eaten* means that the lunch has been finished relative to the present moment).
2. By the time she got to the library, it had been closed for two hours (the past perfect *had been closed* indicates that relative to her arrival at the library, the library’s closure was completed two hours ago).

III. Perfect progressive tenses are used to describe the duration of an action that is in progress **before, up to, or after another event.**

*Examples:*

1. When he gets home from work, his wife will have been running on the treadmill for twenty minutes (the perfect progressive *will have been running* indicates the duration of future action relative to the present tense *gets*).
2. She has been eating that burger for over an hour (the present perfect progressive *has been eating* indicates the duration of her action relative to the present time).

### Why these rules can be confusing:

I. Most verb tense errors occur when a writer is trying to describe when one action occurred relative to another action.

### How to Notice and Correct Any Errors:

I. If your verbs describe events that occur at different times, then you must use tenses to clarify the order of the events.

II. Decide when the action described by each verb was occurring and edit your verb tenses to

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reflect the relationship between events more exactly.

### Let’s Practice:

Read each of the following sentences carefully. Complete each sentence with a correct form of the verb in parentheses.

1. Although I don’t like to exercise, I \_\_\_\_\_ (*try*) to swim for half an hour each day.
2. By the time I got to school, the exam \_\_\_\_\_ (*start*) already.
3. When I \_\_\_\_\_ (*watch*) ten hours of television week, I wasted a lot of time.
4. The research showed that elderly participants who walked regularly \_\_\_\_\_ (*experience*) greater muscle aging than the participants who jogged or ran.
5. She \_\_\_\_\_ (*plan*) her party for over a week by now.

### More Practice:

Correct the errors in verb tense in the following sentences. Some sentences have no errors.

1. Although I was studying on my own, I will have been making more progress at the group study sessions.
2. After seeing his daughter struggle with the measles, he has decided to vaccinate all of his children today.
3. Before he arrives at the park, his team will have been practicing since dawn.
4. She wants to grow a garden this summer, so she will have been working on it every day.
5. Despite her best efforts, she has not been successful because she had not practiced.

### Further Resources:

[Sequence of Tenses](#)

[Verb Tense Consistency](#)

These materials were partially adapted from *Understanding and Using English Grammar*. 4th ed. Ed. Betty S. Azar and Stacy A. Hagen. Pearson Longman, 2009.