

Verb Tenses

English has twelve major verb tenses that mark the sentences relationship to time. Did the action in the sentence happen in the past? Just once in the past, or many times? Does it continue in the present? The answers to these questions (in the form of verb tenses) allow you to create a sense of real time in your essay, which helps to orient the reader. It's also important to be aware of verb tenses to avoid making verb tense agreement errors in your essay. Below is a list that breaks down the twelve major verb tenses and includes examples.

Simple

The simple verb tenses describe an action that occurred at a specific time. The simple tenses can describe both a single incidence and ongoing or repeated actions.

Simple Past Examples

"He **studied** for his test last night."
He **studied** at the library most Mondays."

Simple Present Examples

"She **switches** the lamp on."
"She **runs** every Wednesday afternoon."

Simple Future Examples

"They **will pass** their midterms if they work hard."
"I **will go** to the grocery store tomorrow."

Perfect

The perfect verb tenses refer to a finished or completed event—one that either began in the past and was completed in the present; began in the past and was completed in the past; or will be completed in the future.

Past Perfect Examples

"She **had lived** in New York before moving here."
"He **had known** about the leak before the tenants moved in."

Present Perfect Examples

"They **have** already **read** that chapter."
"She **has taught** here for five years."

Future Perfect Examples

"We **will have eaten** dinner already by then."
"He **will** already **have spent** that money."

Progressive

The progressive tenses describe either an unfinished, ongoing action or completed action that took place over a long period of time.

Past Progressive Examples

“They **were studying** for five hours last night.”

“I **was planning** to go to the party, but now I’m not sure.”

Present Progressive Examples

“I **am working** until seven o’clock tonight.”

“He **is running** right now, but he’ll be back later.”

Future Progressive Examples

“I **will be working** tomorrow, but we can meet on Thursday.”

“She **will be reading** a poem at the event tomorrow.”

Perfect Progressive

The perfect progressive tenses describe an action in progress that may or may not be completed—one that started in the past, continues currently, and may continue in the future; one that started and ended in the past; or one that started in the present and will continue.

Past Perfect Progressive Examples

“He **had been studying** until his friends came.”

“She **had been playing** music for ten years before her injury.”

Present Perfect Progressive Examples

“He **has been practicing** his tuba for months for the recital.”

“She **has been learning** how to throw ceramics since she was ten.”

Future Perfect Progressive Examples

“I **will have been working** here for a year next month.”

“They **will have been swimming** for a few hours before we get there.”

Conclusion

While verb tenses aren’t always the flashiest ways of improving your writing, their clarity and continuity are crucial to helping your reader know where and when they are. Making sure your verb tenses agree is a quick and simple way to check that your paper is clear and makes sense!

References Consulted

1. Purdue Writing Lab. "Introduction to Verb Tenses // Purdue Writing Lab." *Purdue Writing Lab*, Purdue University, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/verb_tenses/index.html.
2. "Understanding Verbs Verb Tenses." *Understanding Verbs: Verb Tenses*, University of Houston-Victoria, <https://www.uhv.edu/curriculum-and-student-achievement/student-success/tutoring/resources/q-z/understanding-verbs-verb-tenses/#:~:text=The%20perfect%20tenses%20describe%20a,past%20perfect%20and%20ofuture%20perfect.&text=The%20perfect%20progressive%20tenses%20describe,progress%20but%20was%20then%20finished>.