

Grammar Help Sheet: Tenses of Verbs

When people talk about what is happening now, we say that the verb is in the present tense. This expression means the present time. The verb is the word or words that tell what is happening or being done. Examples are “talk” in the sentence “We talk” or “play” in the sentence The children play outdoors.

When we want to say something has already happened, we must change the verb to the past tense or the past time. We usually make the change by adding “ed” to the present tense. For instance we would change the sentence above to We talked and The children played outdoors.

When we want to say something is going to happen in the future, we must change the verb to the future tense. We usually keep the present tense of the main verb and add “will” before the verb. For instance we would change the sentences to We will talk and The children will play.

There are six main tenses in English. The tense denotes the time of the action indicated by the verb.

1. Most common is the present tense which expresses action which is going on at the present time.

He looks happy.

The present tense may express future time.

The ship sails Thursday.

It may be used in the historical present referring to the past.

The fire department arrives just in time.

2. The past tense expresses action completed at a definite time in the past.

It snowed yesterday.

We hurried through the airport.

James tried to explain why he was late.

3. The future tense expresses action which will take place in the future.

She will come to the party.

They will plan to arrive after lunch.

Sabrina will bring an appetizer.

4. The present perfect tense expresses action completed at the present time and is formed by adding “has” or “have” to the past participle.

I have cooked three meals a day for years.

He has run three marathons.

We have replied to the invitation on their website.

5. The past perfect tense expresses action completed before a certain time in the past and is formed by adding “had” to the past participle.

I had mailed my letter before I received his.

I had helped my neighbors before they asked.

The farmers had planted the field before the tornado.

6. The future perfect tense expresses action which will be completed before a certain time in the future and is formed by adding “shall have” or “will have” to the past participle.

I shall have gone by the time he gets here.

He will have gone by the time I am ready.

Regular and Irregular Verbs

There are two types of verbs-regular and irregular. Their tenses are formed in different ways.

A regular verb is a verb that forms its past tense and past participle by adding “ed” to the first person singular of the present tense. When the first person singular of the present tense ends in “e”, we just add “d” to form the past tense and the past participle. When the present tense ends in “y”, we often form the past by changing the “y” to “i” and then adding “ed”.

Present	Past	Past participle
walk	walked	walked
live	lived	lived
change	changed	changed
cry	cried	cried
reply	replied	replied

An irregular verb is a verb that forms its past tense and past participle by changing a vowel or consonant or altering the spelling.

Present	Past	Past participle
go	went	gone
fight	fought	fought
drive	drove	driven

Be sure to use the tense that indicates the time you are trying to express and after you have determined it avoid shifts tense.

After the writer decides on the perspective he is to use toward people and events he should not shift from one tense to another as this may confuse the reader.

For example in the sentence “I think Ellen is at home” both verbs “think” and “is” are in the present tense. If you wrote “I thought Mary was at home” both “thought” and “was” are in the past tense. Do not shift from one to the other, however. Do not write “I thought Mary is at home.”