

Grammar Handout

Summary of Verb Forms

When you are deciding which verb form, or tense, to use, you should make certain that you do not confuse the words tense and time. Tense refers to the form of a verb, such as eating, has eaten, will eat. Time is not a grammatical form; it is a concept existing in the mind of the speaker or writer. There are only three "times" - past, present and future - but there are many tenses in English. These tenses express the relationships between time and other factors, such as whether the action is completed or still in progress and whether the sentence states a true fact or only a wish.

For example, the verb forms (or tenses) in the four sentences below all express different relationships to present time.

Present Continuous:

He is working for his brother while his brother is in the hospital.

By using the present continuous form, the writer is emphasizing that the action is taking place now - during the time that his brother is unable to work - and that it is only a temporary activity.

Present Simple:

He studies during the day and works at night.

By using the present simple form, the writer is telling us that this is a habitual activity that has happened in the past, is happening in the present, and will probably continue to happen in the future.

Present Perfect:

He has lived in the apartment for ten years.

By using the present perfect form, the writer is indicating that the person still lives there now. If the person no longer lived there, the writer would have used the past simple form.

Past Simple:

He lived in the same apartment for ten years.

From these examples, you can see that verb tense and time are not the same thing. Many factors determine the correct verb tense.

THE PRESENT TENSES

Present Simple: SIMPLE FORM I go

SIMPLE FORM + S He goes.

Present simple states general truths. The time is unimportant.

Heavy rainfall accompanies a hurricane except in the center, which remains relatively calm.

The sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

There are thirty days in September.

The company ships the computers to many foreign countries.

Present simple also describes a present action or condition.

I hear you. Here comes the bus.

Present simple also describes repeated or habitual actions. In this case, an adverb of frequency (always, often, sometimes, occasionally, seldom, never, etc.) or other time expression (every day, every weekend, daily, etc.) is often added to indicate the frequency of repetition.

John attends classes three times a week. I run on Tuesdays and Sundays.

Businessmen usually fly to save time.

In addition, the present simple is used with certain non-activity verbs to describe feelings, perceptions, and conditions at the moment of speaking. These verbs are not normally used in the present continuous.

I love you. Do you believe in God? I don't understand you.

They need a loan. He knows the answer. They want to get married.

Present Continuous: AM I am going.
 IS + VERB + ING He is going.
 ARE We are going.

Present continuous describes an action or condition that is taking place at the moment of speaking.

I am playing soccer now. They are writing as fast as they can.

The chef is preparing the food. The food is being prepared.

Present continuous also describes an action or condition that is currently in progress even if not actually at the moment of speaking.

Scientists are investigating the ocean for new sources of food.

The cost of living is still climbing.

Present continuous can also be used with verbs of perception.

He is feeling sad.

Present Perfect: HAS + PAST PARTICIPLE I have gone.
 HAVE He has gone.

Present perfect links the present and the past. It must be used for actions that began in the past and still exist in the present.

I have lived in the same apartment for two years. He has worn glasses all his life.

When I arrived home, he had already called. They have been married since 1975.

Jane said that she had gone to the movies.

dancing.

They were climbing for twenty-seven days. The producer was making an announcement.

In two-clause sentences, past continuous also describes a temporary action that was in progress when a second action took place. The second action can either happen at the same time, or it can interrupt the first action.

Use while + past continuous for the action in progress.

Use when + past simple for the interrupting action.

His wife was working to support him while he was attending medical school.

We were having dinner when she told me.

The president was smiling and waving to the crowd when the band started playing.

While the president was smiling and waving to the crowd, the band started playing.

We were driving across the bridge when it collapsed.

While we were driving across the bridge, it collapsed.

Past Perfect: HAD + PAST PARTICIPLE He had gone.

Past perfect expresses one past time before another past time. Use past perfect when you want to emphasize that one action occurred earlier than another action. The most recent action is usually in the past simple form.

He drove his car to school because he had missed the bus.

The president did not begin the news conference until the room had become quiet. Sometimes the more recent action is not expressed.

Until last year, the government had not concerned itself with the problem of illegal aliens.

Past Perfect Continuous: HAD + BEEN + VERB + ING He had been going.

Like the past perfect, past perfect continuous expresses one past time before another past time. However, the continuous tense emphasizes the duration of the earlier action.

We had been waiting for an hour before we were told that the concert had been cancelled.

The president had been speaking for almost two hours when the protesters arrived.

Because he had been working too hard, he was nervous and irritable.

THE FUTURE TENSES

Future Simple WILL + SIMPLE FORM He will go.

This is the most neutral way to express future time.

The government will raise income taxes next year. I will get up late tomorrow.

Our representative will pick up the computer. I will not get up early.

IS

ARE + GOING TO + VERB He is going to go.

This form is also used to express future time, especially when the idea of intention or inevitability is involved.

I am going to change my major. (intention)
She is going to have a baby next month. (inevitability)

Present Continuous Future Time: AM I am going (tomorrow).
IS + VERB + ING He is going (tomorrow).
ARE We are going (tomorrow).

The present continuous future time is also used to express future time. Normally a future time expression (tomorrow, next week, this evening) is necessary to convey the future meaning.

We are leaving on our vacation tomorrow. I am meeting my advisor at 2:15 this afternoon.

By next month we will have finished this job. He will not have finished his work until 2:00.

Simple Present Future Time: SIMPLE FORM I leave tomorrow.
SIMPLE FORM + S He leaves tomorrow.

The simple present tense may also be used to describe future actions in the following three situations:

(a) with verbs like come, go, arrive, depart, leave and a future time expression:

The president leaves on his goodwill trip to South America tomorrow.

(b) in time clauses introduced by a time subordinator (after, before, until, etc.):

After the president delivers his speech, he will leave for the airport.

I will not receive my degree until I complete my master's thesis.

Note: The present perfect tense may also be used in these time clauses to express future time.

After the president has delivered his speech, he will leave for the airport.

I will not receive my degree until I have completed my master's thesis.

(c) in conditional clauses:

If we finish the project before the end of the term, we won't have to work on it.

Future Continuous: WILL + BE + VERB + ING He will be going.

Future continuous describes a future action that will be in progress at a specific time or times in the future.

The children will be sleeping by the time we get home.

I will be working on my term paper for the next several weekends.

Future Perfect: WILL + HAVE + PAST PARTICIPLE He will have gone.

Future perfect describes a future action that precedes another future action.

He will have become a millionaire by the time he is twenty.

The movie will have already started before we get to the theater.

Future Perfect Continuous: WILL + HAVE + BEEN + VERB + ING He will have

been working.

Future perfect continuous is used to emphasize the duration of a future action that

occurs before another future action. This tense usually occurs with a "for + period of time" expression.

The movie will have been playing for thirty minutes by the time we get to the theater.