**Key Concepts**

To understand and use verb tenses more accurately, familiarize yourself with the concepts below.

**Inflection**

Inflection describes the changes in the form of a verb to reflect properties like number, person, tense, etc. For example, “running,” “runs,” and “ran” are all different inflectional forms of the verb “run.”

**Situation**

“Situation” is a term used to talk about what is going on in a clause or sentence. Situations are linked to a sentence’s verb. For example, in the sentence “The boy kicked the ball.”, the situation is the boy’s kicking of the ball. Situations are clear in sentences with verbs indicating an action or process but sometimes aren’t as obvious in those with verbs indicating states. For example, the situation in “The ball is red.” is the ball being red.

**Tense**

Tense indicates a situation’s location in time. English only has two inflectional tenses (i.e., tenses which function solely based on changes in the form of the verb): the simple present and the simple past (i.e., preterite).

- **Simple Present**: She runs to school.
- **Simple Past**: She ran to school.

However, English can form other tenses using auxiliary verbs such as “be,” “have,” and “will.” Tenses formed using “have” are called perfect tenses.

- **Present Perfect**: She has eaten.
- **Past Perfect**: She had eaten.
- **Future Perfect**: She will have eaten.
Aspect

If tense describes the location of a situation in time, then aspect describes the situation’s temporal structure. At its most basic, aspect asks the question “Is the situation complete or incomplete at the time of reference?” Just as you can interpret a verb’s tense as past, present, or future, you can interpret a verb’s aspect as either perfective or imperfective.

Perfective situations are presented as complete, whole, and finished during the time referenced. Imagine that you are looking at the situation from the outside: you don’t see the internal temporal components—you only see the complete whole. More often than not, perfective situations are events or one-time occurrences (see Figure 1).

Example: My dog died last night.

Note: In this example, the situation (i.e., the dog’s dying) is completely contained within the time referenced (i.e., last night).

Imperfective situations are presented as incomplete, in progress, segmented, or recurring during the time referenced. Imagine that you are looking at a situation from the inside: you see the different temporal components and how they relate to each other. Imperfective situations are usually associated with states or processes (see Figure 2).

Example: My dog was dying last night.

Note: In this example, the situation (i.e., the dog’s dying) extends beyond the time referenced (i.e., last night). The dog could have started dying before last night. It could have also recovered in the morning. All that is known is that the dog was in the process of dying during the time referenced.

The progressive aspect is a subset of the imperfective aspect. It indicates a situation is in progress. It is formed using “be” and a gerund-participle.

Example: I was playing video games last Friday.

The progressive aspect is always imperfective, but not all imperfective situations are progressive.
Remember, tense and aspect convey different information about the situation. Compare these two sentences:

**Example:** I was playing video games last Friday.

**Example:** I played video games last Friday.

In terms of tense, the situations in both of these sentences are in the past. However, they differ in terms of aspect. The first sentence is imperfective and the second is perfective.

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**Present Tenses**

### Simple Present

The simple present is formed using either the plain present or third-person-singular present form of a verb.

- **Plain Present:** I play video games.
- **Third-person-singular Present:** He plays video games.

At its most basic, the simple present indicates that an action happens in the present. This is a perfective interpretation: the situation or event is complete and finished in the time referenced, which is often left implied. Writers (usually creative writers) narrate events in the present tense when they want to create a sense of immediacy (see Figure 3).

**Example:** The dog runs into the house, and I follow after him. The living room is a mess. My husband shouts from the bedroom.

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### Past Future

**Time Referenced**

However, in its imperfective aspect, the simple present indicates that something is habitually or generally true. This is especially true of “be” in the simple present. Writers use this interpretation when stating facts (see Figure 4).

- **Example:** I work for the University of Maryland, Baltimore.
- **Example:** The atomic weight of copper is 63.55.
- **Example:** Automobiles consume gasoline.
Sometimes, the present tense is also used to speak about the future. This form is called the futurate. Writers mostly use the futurate for scheduled or naturally recurring events (see Figure 5).

**Example:** School *starts* in the fall.

**Example:** The new Star Wars film *opens* next May.

### Present: Progressive Aspect

The present progressive is formed using the auxiliary “be” inflected in the present tense and the gerund-participle of a lexical verb.

**Example:** I *am playing* video games.

In the present progressive, the situation is in progress at the time referenced (i.e., the present, which is usually left implied). The situation began before the time referenced and may continue into the future. Accordingly, the present progressive has an imperfective interpretation (see Figure 6).

**Example:** They *are studying* for the test *right now*.

**Example:** He *is eating* some quiche.

**Example:** We *are working* on our PhDs.

The present progressive can also be used in a futurate sense. When a verb is used in this way, it usually has
a perfective interpretation (see Figure 7).

**Example:** We are visiting the museum this afternoon.

### Present Perfect

The present perfect is formed using the auxiliary verb “have” inflected in the present tense to match the subject and the past participle of a lexical verb.

**Example:** I have played video games before.

The present perfect connects present and past tenses, suggesting that what occurred in the past has relevance in the current moment.

The present perfect can be used in a variety of ways. It is used to focus on the **duration** of a past situation until now (i.e., the relevant moment). This interpretation requires the use of time-related modifiers, such as adverbs or prepositional phrases. The relevant moment is often left implied (see Figure 8).

**Example:** As of today, I have played video games for ten years.

**Example:** He has not eaten for days.

**Example:** They have slept here all week.

The present perfect is also used to refer to situations occurring at an **unspecified time** in the past. The relevant moment is often left implied here as well (see Figure 9).

**Example:** I have played video games before.

**Example:** She has never written me.

**Example:** They have already eaten.
**Present Perfect: Progressive Aspect**

The present perfect progressive is formed using the auxiliary “have” inflected in the present tense, the past participle of “be” (i.e., “been”), and the gerund-participle of a lexical verb.

**Example:** I **have been playing** video games since dawn.

The present perfect progressive emphasizes that a situation that began in the past will likely continue past the relevant moment (i.e., the present) and on into the future. The relevant moment is often left implied (see Figure 10).

**Example:** As of right now, I **have been playing** video games for ten hours straight.

**Example:** They **have been sleeping** all night.

**Example:** I **have been working** here for years.

**Past Tenses**

**Simple Past (Preterite)**
The simple past or preterite is formed using the preterite of a lexical verb.

**Example:** The dog **ran** into the house, and I **followed** after him.

This simple past is used to refer to situations that occurred in the past. These situations can be either an
occurrence or a state. The time reference is often implied (see Figure 11).

**Example:** I played video games **last night**.

**Example:** She worked at UMB.

**Example:** Harrison Ford starred in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

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The simple past is also used for polite requests.

**Example:** I wanted to ask you a question.

**Past: Progressive Aspect**

The past progressive is formed using the auxiliary “be” inflected in the past tense (i.e., “were” and “was) and the gerund-participle of a lexical verb.

**Example:** I was playing video games.

In the past progressive, the situation was **in progress** at a past moment (i.e., the time referenced) (see Figure 12).

**Example:** I was working at Johns Hopkins five years ago.

**Example:** She was sleeping when the car backfired.

**Example:** They were eating dinner at 5 p.m.

This use of the past progressive is especially helpful when talking about two events or activities that happened **simultaneously** in the past (see Figure 12).

**Example:** Mom was washing the dishes while Dad was folding the laundry.

**Example:** I was earning my master’s degree while she was living in Europe.
Past Perfect

The past perfect is formed using the auxiliary “have” inflected in the past tense to match the subject and the past participle of a lexical verb.

**Example:** He **had played** video games before.

The past perfect is a double past tense, suggesting that what occurred in the past has relevance to another moment in the past (i.e., the relevant moment). Since most authors use the simple past to narrate events, the past perfect provides a way to discuss events which happened even earlier.

**Example:** I **went** (simple past) to meet Jessica, but I soon **realized** (simple past) that I **had forgotten** (past perfect) my wallet.

*Note:* In this example, the forgetting happens before the going and realizing.

Past perfect is also used to focus on the duration of a past situation up until another moment in the past (i.e., the relevant moment). This interpretation requires the use of time-related modifiers, such as adverbs or prepositional phrases (see Figure 13).

**Example:** As of yesterday, he **had played** video games for ten years.

**Example:** She **had not slept** for two days.

**Example:** He **had worked** at UMB for ten years by 2013.

![Figure 13: Past Perfect—Duration](image)

The past perfect can also be used to refer to situations occurring at an unspecified time in the past before the relevant moment. The time referenced is often left implied (see Figure 14).

**Example:** I **had played** video games before.

**Example:** The **had never been** there.

**Example:** The dog **had learned** to play dead.

![Figure 14: Past Perfect—Unspecified Past](image)

Additionally, the past perfect is used to discuss situations that were intended but not completed. The time
referenced is often left implied.

**Example:** I had wanted to go surfing on our honeymoon, but the ocean was just too rough.

**Example:** He had hoped to visit his great-grandmother before she died but was not able to get here in time.

### Past Perfect: Progressive Aspect

The past perfect progressive is formed using the auxiliary “have” inflected in the past tense, the past participle of “be” (i.e., “been”), and the gerund-participle of a lexical verb.

**Example:** He had been playing video games.

The past perfect progressive emphasizes that a situation that began in the past and might have continued past the relevant moment into the future. It is often used to discuss interruptions (see Figure 15).

**Example:** When she arrived, I had been playing video games for ten hours straight.

**Example:** They had been minding their own business when the cops showed up.

**Example:** She had been sleeping for two hours by the time the class was over.

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**Future “Tenses”**

English does not have any inflection-based future tenses. Instead, English forms its future tenses by using the modal auxiliary verb “will” and the plain form of a lexical verb.

### Simple Future

The simple future is the most basic future construction. It is formed using “will” and the plain form of a lexical verb.

**Example:** I will play video games tonight.

The simple future locates an event in the future. It has a perfective interpretation (see Figure 16).

**Example:** I will study social work at UMB.

**Example:** She will sleep outside tonight.

**Example:** He will eat Chinese food for lunch today.
Future: Progressive Aspect

The future progressive is formed using the auxiliaries “will” and “be” along with the gerund-participle of a lexical verb. Sentences using the future progress usually include a time-related modifier, such as a prepositional phrase or adverb.

Example: I will be studying tonight.

In the present progressive, the situation will be in progress at a future time of reference. This has an imperfective interpretation (see Figure 17).

Example: I will be playing video games when you get here.
Example: They will not be working here tomorrow.
Example: She will be traveling in Europe on her birthday.

Future Perfect

The future perfect is formed using the auxiliaries “will” and “have” along with the past participle of a lexical verb.

Example: I will have studied for the test by the time you arrive.

Like the other perfect tenses, the future perfect is a double tense, combining a future relevant moment with the time before it.

It can be used to emphasize the duration of future activity that is part of the normal course of events (see Figure 18).

Example: If I don’t quit soon, I will have played that video game for ten hours!
Example: She will have eaten quiche for six straight meals.
Example: On Monday, they will have worked here for three months.
The future perfect can also be used to show that a situation will occur at an unspecified time before the relevant moment (see Figure 19).

**Example:** I will have beaten that video game by then!

**Example:** She will have eaten the entire quiche!

**Example:** They will have finished here by the time you arrive.

### Future Perfect: Progressive Aspect

The future perfect progressive is formed using the auxiliaries “will” and “have,” the past participle of “be” (i.e., “been”), and the gerund-participle of a lexical verb.

**Example:** I will have been studying for three hours by the time you arrive.

The future perfect progressive emphasizes that a situation that began prior to the relevant moment and might continue past it into the future. It is often used to discuss **interruptions** and **duration** (see Figure 20).

**Example:** I will have been playing that video game for ten hours by then!

**Example:** She will have been eating quiche every night for two weeks.

**Example:** As of next Tuesday, they will have been working on that project for three years.
References