

What is Tense?

tense (noun): a form of a verb used to indicate the time, and sometimes the continuation or completeness, of an action in relation to the time of speaking. (From Latin tempus = time).

Tense is a method that we use in English to refer to time - past, present and future. Many languages use tenses to talk about time. Other languages have no tenses, but of course they can still talk about time, using different methods.

So, we talk about time in English with tenses. **But**, and this is a very big **but**:

- we can also talk about time without using tenses (for example, [going to](#) is a special construction to talk about the future, it is not a tense)
- one tense does not always talk about one time (see [Tense & Time](#) for more about this)

Here are some of the terms used in discussing verbs and tenses.

Mood

indicative mood expresses a simple statement of fact, which can be positive (affirmative) or negative

- I **like** coffee.
- I **do not like** coffee.

interrogative mood expresses a question

- Why **do** you **like** coffee?

imperative mood expresses a command

- **Sit down!**

subjunctive mood expresses what is imagined or wished or possible

- The President ordered that he **attend** the meeting.

Voice

Voice shows the relationship of the subject to the action. In the **active voice**, the subject does the action (cats eat mice). In the **passive voice**, the subject receives the action (mice are eaten by cats). Among other things, we can use voice to help us change the focus of attention.

Aspect

Aspect expresses a feature of the action related to time, such as completion or duration. Present simple and past simple tenses have no aspect, but if we wish we can stress with other tenses that:

- the action or state referred to by the verb is completed (and often still relevant), for example:
I **have emailed** the report to Jane. (so now she has the report)
(This is called **perfective aspect**, using perfect tenses.)
- the action or state referred to by the verb is in progress or continuing (that is, uncompleted), for example:
We **are eating**.
(This is called **progressive aspect**, using progressive [continuous] tenses.)

English Tenses

tense	Affirmative/Negative/Question	Use	Signal Words
Simple Present	A: He speaks. N: He does not speak. Q: Does he speak?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • action in the present taking place once, never or several times • facts • actions taking place one 	always, every ..., never, normally, often, seldom, sometimes, usually if sentences type I (If I talk, ...)

		<p>after another</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • action set by a timetable or schedule 	
Present Progressive	<p>A: He is speaking. N: He is not speaking. Q: Is he speaking?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • action taking place in the moment of speaking • action taking place only for a limited period of time • action arranged for the future 	<p>at the moment, just, just now, Listen!, Look!, now, right now</p>
Simple Past	<p>A: He spoke. N: He did not speak. Q: Did he speak?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • action in the past taking place once, never or several times • actions taking place one after another • action taking place in the middle of another action 	<p>yesterday, 2 minutes ago, in 1990, the other day, last Friday if sentence type II (If I talked, ...)</p>
Past Progressive	<p>A: He was speaking. N: He was not speaking. Q: Was he speaking?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • action going on at a certain time in the past • actions taking place at the same time • action in the past that is interrupted by another action 	<p>when, while, as long as</p>
Present Perfect Simple	<p>A: He has spoken. N: He has not spoken. Q: Has he spoken?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • putting emphasis on the result • action that is still going on • action that stopped recently • finished action that has an influence on the present • action that has taken place once, never or several times before the moment of speaking 	<p>already, ever, just, never, not yet, so far, till now, up to now</p>
Present Perfect Progressive	<p>A: He has been speaking. N: He has not been</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • putting emphasis on the course or duration (not 	<p>all day, for 4 years, since 1993, how</p>

	<p>speaking. Q: Has he been speaking?</p>	<p>the result)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • action that recently stopped or is still going on • finished action that influenced the present 	<p>long?, the whole week</p>
<p>Past Perfect Simple</p>	<p>A: He had spoken. N: He had not spoken. Q: Had he spoken?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • action taking place before a certain time in the past • sometimes interchangeable with past perfect progressive • putting emphasis only on the fact (not the duration) 	<p>already, just, never, not yet, once, until that day if sentence type III (If I had talked, ...)</p>