

Tense and aspect

Tense refers to the time when an action or event takes place: present, past and future.

Aspect refers to how we regard the duration of the action or event being described – whether it is in progress or complete. We have two aspects: the continuous (also known as 'progressive') and the perfect (also known as 'perfective'). There is no simple aspect. Each tense (or time) can be expressed in the continuous and the perfect aspect. The tense forms in each different aspect share common characteristics.

Continuous aspect

Present Continuous, Past Continuous and Future Continuous

The continuous aspect shows that actions or events are in progress during a particular period of time. The actions are temporary and/or of limited duration and occur in present time, past time or future time. The actions are not necessarily completed.

Perfect aspect

Present Perfect, Past Perfect and Future Perfect

The perfect aspect creates a link between two time periods. It shows:

- the connection between an action happening in one time and an action happening in another time.
- the connection between an action happening in one time and another point in time.

The continuous and perfect aspects combine to show that an action has been, was or will be in progress before a point in time (Present Perfect Continuous, Past Perfect Continuous and Future Perfect Continuous).

Simple tense forms

Present Simple and Past Simple

These tenses perform similar functions when referring to present time (Present Simple) and past time (Past Simple). Both these tenses are used to talk about:

- routines and habits:
Present Simple: *They walk to college every day.*
Past Simple: *They walked to college every day.*
- states and permanent situations:
Present Simple: *He feels angry.*
Past Simple: *He felt angry.*
Present Simple: *They live in the USA.*
Past Simple: *They lived in the USA.*

Note:

The Present Simple is always used when we refer to general truths.
The Earth travels round the Sun.

Future forms

The future is not expressed by a single tense. Depending on what exactly we want to express about the future we can use:

- the Present Continuous (for agreed arrangements):
I'm seeing Jo and Tony at the café later.

- *be going to* + verb (for intentions and predictions for which there is present evidence):

He says he's going to travel for a year before going to university.

Look at their expressions! It's obvious they're not going to be friends!

- *will* + verb (for future facts, sudden decisions and general predictions):

He'll be eighteen next year.

OK. I'll tell him!

I'm sure they'll get on with each other in the end. Just give them time!

- the Present Simple (for timetabled events; after certain time adverbials when describing a future event):

The party starts at eight.

I'll call you as soon as they arrive.

Continuous tense forms

Present Continuous, Past Continuous and Future Continuous

The continuous forms are used to talk about:

- Actions in progress at the time of speaking in the present (NOT repeated actions):
Present Continuous: *I'm watching the film right now.*
- Actions in progress at a particular time in the past:
Past Continuous: *I was watching the film then.*
- Actions in progress in the future:
Future Continuous: *This time tomorrow I'll be flying to Paris!*
- Temporary actions or situations:
Present Continuous: *He's working for his dad for the time being.*
Past Continuous: *He was working for his dad when I met him.*
Future Continuous: *He'll be working for his dad for a while.*

Note:

The Present and Past Continuous tenses can be used with repeated actions and an adverb of frequency to show annoyance at the repeated action:

He is/was always forgetting to lock the door!

Stative and dynamic verbs

Verbs expressing emotions (e.g. *hate, like, love*), states of mind (e.g. *believe, know, need, prefer, remember, seem, think, understand, want*) or senses (e.g. *feel, hear, see*) are called **stative** or **state** verbs and are not usually used in any continuous tense (unlike **dynamic** or **action** verbs).

Some verbs can be both stative and dynamic, for example:

- *think*
I think you're wrong. (= believe, have an opinion – stative verb)
I'm thinking about the situation. (= consider, be involved in the process of thought – dynamic verb)
- *have*
She has three dogs. (= own, possess – stative verb)
She's having lunch now. (= eat – dynamic verb)