



Perfect Tenses

The perfect tenses in English can cause problems, especially for English language learners. In the language of grammar, the word *perfect* doesn't mean *without mistakes*; it has a different meaning. The word *perfect* comes from the Latin word *perfectum*, which means *complete*. Therefore, perfect tenses are used to show an action that occurred in the past (or will occur in the future) that affects the present time. In other words, these tenses are focused on the present even though the event happened in the past. When you say, "I have finished my homework," it means that your homework is done for now, but the focus is on the fact that the action is complete and at the present time there is no more obligation to do that homework.

There are three main forms of the perfect tenses: **present perfect**, **past perfect**, and **future perfect**, but the perfect tense has its progressive forms as well.

Present Perfect

The **present perfect** tense is used for actions that happened at an unspecified time in the past but have continuing relevance to the present. The present perfect tense is made by using **has/have + the past participle of the verb** (he/she/it has worked - I/you/we/they have worked). We use the present perfect tense when:

- 1) The past action happened within an indefinite period.

*I **have seen** that movie twice.*

In this sentence, the time of the action is unimportant; the focus is on the fact that the movie has been seen.

- 2) The action started sometime in the past and continues into the present.

*Anna **has lived** in Arizona for many years.*

In this sentence we understand that Anna moved to Arizona sometime in the past, but the focus is the fact she is still living in Arizona.

Present Perfect Progressive (Continuous)

The **present perfect progressive** tense is used for an action that started in the past and is continuing at the present time. In other words, the action is not yet finished. The present perfect progressive tense is made by using **has/have been + the present participle of the verb (base form + ing)** (he/she/it has been working- I/you/we/they have been working).

*She **has been studying** English for six months.*

We often find the adverbs *recently* and *lately* used with the present perfect progressive tense.

*John **has not been attending** class lately.* (He still isn't attending class.)

The differences between the present perfect and the present perfect progressive can be confusing. Here are a few things to remember about the differences:

1) The present perfect tense is often used with stative verbs. A stative verb describes a *state* (believe, like, feel, have, etc.), in contrast to a dynamic verb, which describes an *action* (run, eat, drive, etc.). We tend not to use the present perfect progressive with stative verbs.

*I **have known** my neighbor for three years, **NOT** I have been knowing my neighbor for three years.*

However, there are exceptions like the verb *feel*.

*I **have been feeling** sick lately.*

2) Sometimes there's really no difference in meaning between the two tenses. This is especially the case with verbs such as *live*, *work*, and *study*.

*The family **has lived** in Arizona since 2005.*

*The family **has been living in** Arizona since 2005.*

3) The present perfect progressive tense can be used to emphasize the *length* of time that has passed. The present perfect tense is generally neutral:

*They **have been traveling** for hours!* (This emphasizes the length of time). *They **have traveled** for hours.* (This doesn't emphasize the length of time).

4) The present perfect progressive can be used to say that something is *temporary*:

*My niece **has been exercising** a lot recently.* (She doesn't usually do this). *Usually I don't read books, but recently I **have been reading** a great novel.*

5) We use *yet* and *already* with the present perfect tense but not with the present perfect progressive tense.

*Have you **done** your homework yet? NOT Have you been doing your homework yet?*
*She **has finished** her homework already. NOT She has been finishing her homework already.*

Past Perfect

The **past perfect** tense is used for a past action that finished before another action in the past started. Therefore, because there are two actions, one will be in the simple past tense and the other will be in the past perfect tense. The action that happened first will be in the past perfect tense and the second action will be in the past tense.

She **had eaten** dinner (first action) before I *arrived* (second action).

The past perfect tense is made by using **had + the past participle of the verb** (he/she/it had worked - I/you/we/they had worked). We use the past perfect tense when:

1) There is a completed action in the past before another action in the past happened.

*When her friends arrived she **had already cleaned** the house.*

2) There is reported speech.

*My friend asked me if I **had eaten** at this restaurant before.*

There is something important to remember when using present perfect and past perfect tenses. The words *for* and *since* are often used with these tenses to show time. It is necessary to know the difference between these two words.

For = **period of time** (a few days, one week, one half hour, etc.)

Since = **a specific point in time or a point when the action started** (last year, 2020, August, 12 o'clock, etc.)

Since can only be used in the perfect tenses, and *for* can also be used with the simple past tense.

*He **has studied** English **since** 2010.* (He started at a specific point in time and is still studying English.)

*He **has studied** English **for** ten years.* (He has studied for a known period of time and is still studying.)

He **studied** English **for** ten years. (He is no longer studying English.) **NOT** He studied English since ten years.

Past Perfect Progressive (Continuous)

The **past perfect progressive** indicates the first action stopped *at the point where the second action occurred*. The past perfect progressive tense is made by using **had been + the present participle of the verb (base verb + ing)** (he/she/it had been working- I/you/we/they had been working).

Mary **had been watching** TV when her husband came home.

Because there are two actions that happened in the past, the action that started first will be in the present perfect progressive tense and the second action will use the simple past tense.

The words *when, for, since* and *before* are often used with the past progressive tense.

Mike **had been biking** every day **before** he had an accident.

Future Perfect

The **future perfect** tense expresses actions that will be finished at some point in the future. The future perfect tense is made by using **will have + the past participle of the verb** (he/she/it we will have worked - I/you/we/they will have worked). We use the future perfect tense when actions will be completed at some point in the future.

At eight o'clock, I **will have** already **eaten** breakfast.

The simple future tense is more common and, therefore, preferred, but in rare cases, the future perfect is needed. When the action you are talking about has a deadline, use the future perfect tense. If you don't mention a deadline, use the simple future tense instead of the future perfect tense. With the future perfect, we usually use the prepositions *by* or *before*.

In August 2022, little Bobby **will begin** kindergarten.

By August 2022, little Bobby **will have learned** how to walk and how to talk in addition to many other skills.

Future Perfect Progressive (Continuous)

The **future perfect progressive** tense is used for an action that will have started in the past, present or in the future, and is expected to continue up to and possibly past a particular point in the future. The future perfect progressive tense is made by using **will + have + been + the present participle of the verb (base verb + ing)** (he/she/it will have been working -I/you/we/they will have been working).

When we describe an action in the future perfect progressive tense, we are taking ourselves forward in time and looking back at the duration of an activity. Because we are talking about a time period in the past, the future perfect progressive is most often used with a time expression.

*In November, Juan **will have been studying** English for three years.*

Stative (non action) verbs are usually not used in the future perfect progressive tense. Instead, these verbs take the future perfect tense.

*In November, he **will have known** you for three months.*

NOT *In November, he will have been knowing you for three months.*

PERFECT TENSE EXERCISES

Write the correct form of the perfect tense in the following sentences.

1. They _____ for the bus since two o'clock. (wait)
2. _____ she _____ her friend by this afternoon? (meet)
3. Anna _____ in California all her life. (live)
4. He must be tired! He _____ soccer for several hours. (play)
5. I _____ my money before I bought the car. (save)
6. Next month, he _____ at the university for two years. (study)
7. John _____ his homework yet. (not/finish)
8. We _____ already _____ eating when they arrived. (begin)
9. By the time you start college, your brother _____. (graduate)
10. They _____ already _____ three emails to their friends. (send)
11. She _____ her friend's address. (forget)
12. How long _____ English? (you/learn)
13. We _____ to Mexico many times. (be)
14. Next month he _____ at the university for two years. (study)
15. She _____ the piano for several hours. (practice)
16. We _____ a fast food restaurant for more than an hour. (look for)
17. Bill _____ out when I arrived home. (go)
18. The boy _____ chocolate milk when his mother walked into the kitchen.
(drink)
19. We _____ left the house when they arrived. (leave)
20. Ahmed _____ at the company for six years when he got the promotion.
(work)

(Answer Key on next page.)

Answer Key

1. have been waiting
2. Will (she) have met
3. has lived/has been living
4. has been playing
5. had saved / had been saving
6. will have been studying
7. has not finished
8. had (already) begun
9. will have graduated
10. have (already) sent
11. has forgotten
12. have you been learning
13. have been
14. will have been studying
15. has been practicing
16. have been looking for
17. had gone
18. had been drinking
19. had left
20. had been working