

Aggie Grammar Guide: Verb Tense and Form

English sentences often heavily rely on the verb (action word) to carry a lot of meaning. In this section, you will learn how the verb can show tense (time) within a sentence. Verb tense is critical, as using the wrong tense can make the reader believe an event happened at a different time than you intend. This can create a lot of confusion! The English verb tense system may seem complex, but it is relatively simple, as the forms follow mostly regular patterns.

English has three major times: *present*, *past*, and *future*. Each time has four variations: *simple*, *perfect*, *continuous* (Some may refer to the *continuous* as *progressive*), and *perfect continuous*. To form each of the tenses, you can use a formula, indicated in parentheses. The definitions for the terms are included in the table below. Please see the Subject Verb Agreement chapter to see verb conjugations.

- base form/simple: A form of the verb that indicates no agreement or tense.
- continuous: A form that indicates an ongoing action within a sentence. This is always formed with the helping verb **to be**, depending on agreement with the subject and tense, and the main verb ending in **-ing** (the *present participle* form).
- helping verb: A verb that helps the main verb to function in some way. Typical helping verbs include forms of **to be (am, is, are, was, were)**, **to have (has, have, had)**, and *modal verbs (would, could, should, may, might, can, will)*.
- past participle: A form of the verb used in the *perfect* tenses, regardless of time. It usually ends in **-ed** or **-en**, though there are many irregular forms.
- perfect: A form that indicates movement from one time to another (for example, from past to present) within a sentence. The *perfect* tenses are always formed with the helping verb **to have**, depending on agreement with the subject and tense.
- present participle: A form of the verb used in the *continuous* tenses, regardless of time. It always ends in **-ing**.

Present

The *simple* (base form) form indicates an action that is happening right now, a habit, and/or a general fact.

- Example: The main ingredient in pizza that the Italians **use** frequently **is** leavened dough.

The *perfect (has/have + past participle)* form indicates an action that started in the past, but still affects present time.

- Example: Different countries **have shared** similar foods, ingredients and even special occasions.

The *continuous (am/is/are + present participle)* form indicates an ongoing action.

- Example: Even though there is a time difference between the U.S. and Japan, I can still feel like my friends and I **are sitting** next to each other when I **am chatting** with them on my phone.

The *perfect continuous* (**has/have + been + present participle**) form indicates an ongoing action that started in the past but continues to affect the present.

- Example: There are many benefits that people **have been enjoying** from the Internet, and more and more unexpected results are still on the way.

Past

(Please note that many past verbs are irregular, the forms change, in both the *simple* and *perfect* forms. It may be helpful to refer to a chart to see if the verb you want is regular or not.)

The *simple* (base form + **ed**) form indicates a completed action in the past.

- Example: In the food culture of Mexico, wheat **became** an important ingredient when creating different types of sweet breads.

The *perfect* (**had + past participle**) form indicates an action that was completed before something else in the past. (The *past perfect* is considered formal and is not commonly used in oral English, though it is used in academic, formal settings. Very often, the *simple past* is used instead.)

- Example: It is believed that during the last supper, Jesus Christ **had given** his disciples bread to eat and wine to drink before his death.

The *continuous* (**was/were + present participle**) form indicates an ongoing action that was completed in the past.

- Example: Citations of students' discussions on the Facebook group show what students **were talking** about.

The *perfect continuous* (**had + been + present participle**) form indicates an ongoing action that was completed before something else in the past.

- Example: It is full of details about what **had been happening** during the process - conversations between watchers and how they felt about that.

Future

The *simple* (**will + base form**) form indicates an action that hasn't happened yet.

- Example: I **will go** back to China during the winter break and summer holiday. (The *simple present* can also be used to form the *future* with an adverb of time: I **go** to China **tomorrow**. Furthermore, one can also use *am/is/are + going to*: I am going to go to China.)

The *perfect* (**will + has/have + past participle**) **form** indicates an action that hasn't happened yet and will affect some future action.

- Example: Jurupa Valley **will have run out** of its money by 2015.

The *continuous* (**will** + **be** + *present participle*) form indicates an ongoing action that hasn't happened yet.

- Example: For instance, students majoring in Spanish may consider studying abroad in Madrid since they **will be learning** the real roots of their language.

The *perfect continuous* (**will** + **has/have** + **be** + *present participle*) form indicates an ongoing action that hasn't happened yet and will affect some future action.

- Example: I **will have been working** for many years when I retire early.

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Intermediate Practice

Consider the verb tense and form in each of the following questions. First, identify the verb tense of the bolded verb in each question. Second, respond to the question with a complete sentence using a logical tense and verb choice. For more advanced practice, try using a different verb than the one in the question. Please note, there may be multiple revision options although you will see only one option in the answer key. Compare your revision to the answer and determine if one is more effective. Make sure your verb is in the same tense as the suggested answer.

Example: *What is your favorite thing about UC Davis?*

Verb Tense: *Simple Present*

Answer: *I really **like** working out at the ARC.*

- 1) What **are** you **studying** at UCD?
Verb Tense:
Answer:
- 2) What problems **have** UCD students **been facing** for the last 10 years?
Verb Tense:
Answer:
- 3) What **will** you **be doing** after you graduate?
Verb Tense:
Answer:
- 4) Before you applied, why **were** you **considering** attending UCD?
Verb Tense:
Answer:
- 5) How long **had** you **been attending** school before you came to UCD?
Verb Tense:
Answer:
- 6) What **will** you **have accomplished** by this time next year?
Verb Tense:
Answer:
- 7) What person at UCD **made** the deepest impression on you?
Verb Tense:
Answer:
- 8) How long **will** you **have been going** to UCD by this time next year?
Verb Tense:

Answer:

9) What successful skill in your field **have** you **learned** at UCD?

Verb Tense:

Answer:

10) What do you **think** of your professors at UCD?

Verb Tense:

Answer:

11) When **will** the next quarter **start**?

Verb Tense:

Answer:

Advanced Practice

For this activity, you will read a paragraph with some correct and incorrect verb tenses. Each sentence is numbered with the verbs in bold. Answer each question that follows about verb tense logic following the directions indicated in each question's text.

Please note, there may be multiple response options although you will see only one option in the answer key. Compare your responses to the AGG responses and determine if one is more effective in terms of identifying and explaining tense shifts and revising any illogical verbs.

Example: I can clearly remember one time I try to ask the math professor a question during my first lecture in college last quarter.

Is each verb in a logical tense? If the verbs are logical, write "yes," and if not, state which verb (or verbs) is illogical and revise so it is logical.

Response: No. "Try" is not in a logical tense. While "can remember" is logically in the present tense, "try" should be "tried," which is the past tense, because of the phrase "last quarter" later in the sentence.

Is there a tense switch within this sentence? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.

Response: The original sentence does not have a tense shift, which is illogical. After "try" is revised to "tried," the author shifts from present tense ("can remember") to past tense ("tried"). This shift is now logical because the author is currently remembering a past event.

(1) I **was** "learning" English since elementary school. (2) The reason I **added** quotation marks **is** that in almost every Chinese school, rather than teaching students how to actually use English as a tool to communicate, educators **teach** students how to deal with English exams, which **consist** mostly of vocabulary and grammar. (3) After starting my college life in America, I **am** now proficient in reading and writing but still **had lacked** the ability to speak English in front of people. (4) Actually, this issue **has become** a major problem among Chinese students in American colleges. (5) I once **read** an article **written** by a professor at a university in America. (6) In the article, the author **said** that there **are** more and more Chinese students who **came** to America nowadays and they often **get** nice grades in class. (7) However, unlike native speakers, these Chinese students barely **speak** or **ask** questions during lectures.

Sentence 1: I **was** “learning” English since elementary school.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 1 in a logical tense? If the verb is logical, write “yes,” and if not, state which verb is illogical and revise so it is logical.

Sentence 2: The reason I **added** quotation marks **is** that in almost every Chinese school, rather than teaching students how to actually use English as a tool to communicate, educators **teach** students how to deal with English exams, which **consist** mostly of vocabulary and grammar.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 2 in a logical tense? If the verbs are logical, write “yes,” and if not, state which verb (or verbs) is illogical and revise so it is logical.
- ii. Is there a tense switch within sentence 2? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.
- iii. Is there a tense shift between “have been” in sentence 1 and “added” in sentence 2? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.

Sentence 3: After starting my college life in America, I **am** now proficient in reading and writing but still **had lacked** the ability to speak English in front of people.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 3 in a logical tense? If the verbs are logical, write “yes,” and if not, state which verb (or verbs) is illogical and revise so it is logical.
- ii. Is there a tense switch within sentence 3? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.
- iii. Is there a tense shift between “consist” in sentences 2 and “am” in sentence 3? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.

Sentence 4: Actually, this issue **has become** a major problem among Chinese students in American colleges.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 4 in a logical tense? If the verb is logical, write “yes,” and if not, state which verb is illogical and revise so it is logical.

- ii. Is there a tense shift between "lack" in sentence 3 and "has become" in sentence 4? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.

Sentence 5: I once **read** an article **written** by a professor at a university in America.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 5 in a logical tense? If the verbs are logical, write “yes,” and if not, state which verb (or verbs) is illogical and revise so it is logical.

- ii. Is there a tense switch within sentence 5? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.

- iii. Is there a tense shift between "has become" in sentence 4 and "read" in sentence 5? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.

Sentence 6: In the article, the author **said** that there **are** more and more Chinese students who **came** to America nowadays and they often **get** nice grades in class.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 6 in a logical tense? If the verbs are logical, write “yes,” and if not, state which verb (or verbs) is illogical and revise so it is logical.

- ii. Is there a tense switch within sentence 6? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.

- iii. Is there a tense shift between "written" in sentence 5 and "said" in sentence 6? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.

Sentence 7: However, unlike native speakers, these Chinese students barely **speak** or **ask** questions during lectures.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 7 in a logical tense? If the verbs are logical, write "yes," and if not, state which verb (or verbs) is illogical and revise so it is logical.
- ii. Is there a tense switch within sentence 7? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.
- iii. Is there a tense shift between "get" in sentence 6 and "speak" in sentence 7? Explain whether the tense shift (or lack of a shift) is logical or illogical. If you made any revisions in part i, explain how those changes affect your response.

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Answer Key

What follows are options for answers to the practices. In reality, writers can choose from many correct options.

Intermediate Practice

- 1) Present Continuous. I **am majoring** in Linguistics at UC Davis.
- 2) Present Perfect Continuous. UCD students **have been dealing** with tuition increases for the last 10 years.
- 3) Future Continuous. After I graduate, I **will be looking** for a job.
- 4) Past Continuous. Before I applied, I **was thinking** of attending UC Davis because of its great reputation.
- 5) Past Perfect Continuous. Before I came to UC Davis, I **had been going** to school for 12 years.
- 6) Future Perfect. By this time next year, I **will have passed** all my classes.
- 7) Simple Past. My Chicano/a Studies professor **affected** me the most.
- 8) Future Perfect Continuous. By this time next year, I **will have been attending** UC Davis for two years.
- 9) Present Perfect: I **have developed** my ability to write technical reports.
- 10) Simple Present. My UCD professors **are** kind and helpful.
- 11) Simple Future. The next quarter **will begin** in June.

Advanced Practice

What follows is the correct paragraph and responses to each question that follows.

Corrected paragraph:

(1) I **have been** “learning” English since elementary school. (2) The reason I **added** quotation marks **is** that in almost every Chinese school, rather than teaching students how to actually use English as a tool to communicate, educators **teach** students how to deal with English exams, which **consist** mostly of vocabulary and grammar. (3) After starting my college life in America, I **am** now proficient in reading and writing but still **lack** the ability to speak English in front of people. (4) Actually, this issue **has become** a major problem among Chinese students in American colleges. (5) I once **read** an article **written** by a professor at a university in America. (6) In the article, the author **said** that there **are** more and more Chinese students who **are coming/come** to America nowadays and they often **get** nice grades in class. (7) However, unlike native speakers, these Chinese students barely **speak** or **ask** questions during lectures.

Sentence 1: I **was** “learning” English since elementary school.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 1 in a logical tense? No. “Was” should be “have been” because the word “since” is an adverb that indicates an action that started in the past and continues into the present.

Sentence 2: The reason I **added** quotation marks **is** that in almost every Chinese school, rather than teaching students how to actually use English as a tool to communicate, educators **teach** students how to deal with English exams, which **consist** mostly of vocabulary and grammar.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 2 in a logical tense? Yes
- ii. Is there a tense switch within sentence 2? Yes. The author logically shifts from past (“added”) to present (“is,” “teach,” “consist”). This is logical because the action of adding quotation marks happened in the past, whereas the other verbs indicate general facts, which are always in the present tense.
- iii. Is there a tense shift between “have been” in sentence 1 and “added” in sentence 2? Yes. This shift is logical because the first action is ongoing, while the second action is completed.

Sentence 3: After starting my college life in America, I **am** now proficient in reading and writing but still **had lacked** the ability to speak English in front of people.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 3 in a logical tense? No. While “am” and “started” are logical, “had lacked” should be “lack,” which is the present tense, to be consistent with “am.”
- ii. Is there a tense switch within sentence 3? The original sentence has a tense shift from present (“am”) to past perfect (“had lacked”), but it is illogical. After changing “had lacked” to “lack,” both verbs are logically in the present tense and there is no tense shift.
- iii. Is there a tense shift between “consist” in sentence 2 and “am” in sentence 3? There is no tense shift between the sentences, and this is logical because the author is continuing to discuss general facts.

Sentence 4: Actually, this issue **has become** a major problem among Chinese students in American colleges.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 4 in a logical tense? Yes
- ii. Is there a tense shift between “lack” in sentence 3 and “has become” in sentence 4? Yes, although both are types of present tenses; “lack” is the simple present and “has become” is the present perfect. This shift is logical because the author is moving from a general fact (lacking the ability to speak English in front of people) to an action that started in the past and continues to the present (English ability being a problem for Chinese students).

Sentence 5: I once **read** an article **written** by a professor at a university in America.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 5 in a logical tense? Yes
- ii. Is there a tense switch within sentence 5? There is no tense shift in the sentence, and this is logical because the author is describing past actions. (Note: “written” is a reduced form of “which was written,” which is the passive past tense).
- iii. Is there a tense shift between “has become” in sentence 4 and “read” in sentence 5? Yes. Sentence 4 is in the present perfect tense (“has become”), while sentence 5 is in the past tense (“read,” “written”). This shift is logical because the author is moving from discussing an ongoing problem to actions the author completed in the past.

Sentence 6: In the article, the author **said** that there **are** more and more Chinese students who **came** to America nowadays and they often **get** nice grades in class.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 6 in a logical tense? No. “Said,” “are,” and “get” are all logical, but “came” should be “come” or “are coming” because the adverb “nowadays” indicates present time.
- ii. Is there a tense switch within sentence 6? The original sentence logically shifts between past (“read”) and present (“are”), but the shift back to past (“came”) is illogical. After revising “came” to “come” or “coming,” the shift between past (“said”) and present (“are,” “come/coming,” “get”) is logical because the author starts by describing a past action (an attribution to something the article’s author wrote in the past) and moves to describing general facts, which are in the present tense.
- iii. Is there a tense shift between “written” in sentence 5 and “said” in sentence 6? There is no shift between the sentences, and this is logical because the author is continuing to discuss the article’s author in the past.

Sentence 7: However, unlike native speakers, these Chinese students barely **speak** or **ask** questions during lectures.

- i. Is each verb in sentence 7 in a logical tense? Yes
- ii. Is there a tense switch within sentence 7? No. Both verbs are present (“speak,” “ask”), and this is logical because the author is speaking generally.
- iii. Is there a tense shift between “get” in sentence 6 and “speak” in sentence 7? No. The author logically continues to use present tense in sentences 6 and 7 to indicate that they are continuing to discuss Chinese students generally.