

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.