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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.

Vocabulary Term	Definition
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 <i>present participle</i> 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 <i>modal verbs (would, could, should, may, might, can, will)</i> .
past participle	A form of the verb used in the <i>perfect</i> 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 <i>perfect</i> 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 <i>continuous</i> 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.

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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. There is more than one way to respond to each question, although you'll only see one option in the answer key. 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:

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Advanced Practice

For this activity, you will practice switching verb tenses within a text. Consistency is important, but it's also equally important to know when to change a tense to fit the logic of your writing. Write a paragraph in which you practice moving from the past to present by answering the following question: **Discuss how your high school did or did not prepare you for studying at UCD.** Be sure to provide examples to support your ideas.

Sample Sentence: "I **can** clearly **remember** one time I **tried to ask** the math professor a question during the first lecture in college" is a sentence with two time frames. The first action, **can remember**, is happening in the present, while the second action, **tried to ask**, happened in the past.

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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

I **have been** “learning” English since elementary school. 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. As a result, I **was proficient** in reading and writing but **lacked** the ability to speak English in front of people after I **started** my college life in America. Actually, this issue **has become** a major problem among Chinese students in American colleges. I once **read** an article **written** by a professor at a university in America. In the article, the author **said** that there **are** more and more Chinese students who **come** to America nowadays and they often **get** nice grades in class. However, unlike native speakers, these Chinese students barely **speak** or **ask** questions during lectures and **make** the class boring.