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Continue with Recommended Cookies Home » English Vocab and Grammar » 12 Timeless Tenses in English and How to Master ThemWithout tenses in English, it would be impossible for you to tell people what you want, what you did and what your plans are.Nothing would make sense anymore.So in this post, you will learn everything you need to know about the tenses in English—from what they are to how to practice them.Contents What Is a Tense?We know tenses are important, but do you know what a tense is?Simply put, a tense is a form of a verb that allows us to express time. For example, if you want to talk about something that happened last week, you would use the past tense. If you want to talk about something that will happen next month, you would use the future tense.When using tenses in English, we use the present (right now) as our point of reference because we are living in it.So if you ate pizza yesterday, that action happened in the past, right?The answer is “yes,” because it happened before the present time (before right now.)Since you ate pizza in the past, if you want to tell someone about it, you will have to use the past tense in English.I ate pizza yesterday. Now imagine you want to tell your friend about a trip to the mountains. This trip is going to happen in three days, so the trip is in the future.You cannot possibly use the same tense you used to say that you ate pizza yesterday.This time, you will have to use a different tense, one that expresses that an action will happen after our present time. That tense is the future simple tense:I will go on a trip next Saturday. Why Learning the Tenses in English Is ImportantThere are several reasons why you should know how to use the English tenses. English is a chronological language.This may sound scary, but it just means that English needs all its tenses in order to locate an action in time or express the relationship between two different actions.For example:She arrived yesterday. (The action happened in the past.)She will arrive tomorrow. (The action will happen in the future.)I was having a bath when the telephone rang. (There is a relationship between the two actions. Me having a bath was an action going on for some time in the past. The telephone ringing interrupted my bath.) Tenses can help you say what you actually want to say.This should be obvious. Each tense in English is used for one or more specific purposes. You will need to use one tense or another depending on what you want to say:I drink water every day. (Repeated action.)I am drinking water at the moment. (Action happening at the moment of speaking.)I will drink water later. (Action in the future.)Yesterday I drank a lot of water. (Action in the past.) English is a world language.English has become the main language of communication in the world.Millions and millions of people use it every day to communicate with friends, colleagues, bosses and more.If you want to be part of that world conversation, you should know English, and knowing English means knowing the tenses in English! Tenses will help you get fluent.Tenses will make the difference between being a beginner who can talk about their daily routine and speaking fluently about politics.The more tenses you learn, the better you will get at speaking English properly.A big difference between a beginner and an advanced learner is how well they know the tenses and how they use them. Learning tenses can improve all your language skills.Grammar (and tenses) are present in everything we do in English, from telling the time to wishing a happy birthday to someone.We use tenses when we speak, listen to a podcast, watch a movie, read a book and more. So the more we know about tenses, the best we can apply our knowledge to all the other language skills. Without tenses, passing your English exams would be impossible.Finally, you need to learn the tenses if you want to pass your classes or ace (get high marks in) your official exams.Even if you are learning English on your own and you don’t plan on taking an exam, you must have a reason for learning, and because of that, you will want to know if you are making progress (getting better). What Are the Tenses in English?English has 12 tenses. They are divided into three groups (present, past and future). Each group is further broken down into simple, continuous (progressive), perfect and perfect continuous tenses. The Present TenseThe present tense group includes four tenses that either allow us to talk about the present or are related to it somehow. The present simpleWe use the present simple to talk about repeated actions, habits, general truths, wishes and emotions.This tense is also used for directions and instructions, and to talk about timetables and schedules.She goes to school by bus. I am very tired. The plane lands at 7:30 a.m. The present continuousThe present continuous is used to describe actions or events that are happening at the moment (right now) or are ongoing.We also use this tense when someone or something is bothering us.I am not learning anything. Mario is reading a book. You are always arriving late to class! The present perfectThis is the tense we use to describe actions and events that happened at some point in the past but have a consequence or effect on the present. I have lost my wallet. Mary has broken her leg. The neighbors have just moved in. The present perfect continuousWe use this tense to talk about actions and events that started happening in the past and are still happening today/now.I have been living in Poland for 13 years. They have been waiting for over three hours. She has been learning English for six months. The Past TenseThe past tense includes the four tenses that help us talk about the past. The past simpleThe past simple is used to describe past actions and events that are completely finished.He died in 2012 in a car accident. I went to the mall last week. Rose got married last month. The past continuousWe use the past continuous when we need to describe past actions and events that lasted over a period of time.I was running when I fell. They were watching TV while I was washing the dishes. Someone rang the bell when Sarah was having a bath. The past perfectThe past perfect is used to talk about actions and events that happened before another action or before a specific time in the past.He had already left when I arrived. Brooke had already moved to France when that happened. When the police arrived, the thief had already escaped. The past perfect continuousWe use the past perfect continuous to talk about actions and events that started in the past and lasted until another action or event in the past happened.He had been waiting for two hours when he decided to go back home. The kids had been playing for only five minutes when it started to rain. By the time I arrived home, she had been crying for at least an hour. The Future TenseThe future tense group includes the four tenses that refer to the future. The future simpleWe use the future simple mainly for predictions and spontaneous decisions.I think it will rain tomorrow. We will help you! You will find the love of your life in December. The future continuousThis tense is used to refer to actions or events that will be in progress at some point in the future.I will be working when you come back. Jessica will be waiting for you there. We will be eating dinner by then. The future perfectWe use the future perfect tense to say that an action or event will be finished at some point in the future.He will have finished by 8 p.m. The man will have written the report by Monday. I will not have eaten by the time you come back. The future perfect continuousThe future perfect continuous is used to describe actions and events that, at some point in the future, will have already lasted for some time.By the end of this year, I will have been living in London for seven years. She will have been waiting for three hours by 5 p.m. In two months, I will have been studying English for one year. What Are English Participles?English has two special verb forms that are called English participles. You actually know these two verb forms already, but maybe not by name.On the one hand, we have the present participle, which is the participle that ends with -ing.We have seen it in the previous section together with the verb to be in the continuous compound tenses. Here you have two more examples of it:She is drinking some tea. We were waiting for two hours.Apart from using it to form the progressive tenses, the present participle can also be used as an adjective: She called from the neighboring house.Many learners of English mistake gerunds for present participles because they look exactly the same. However, there is a great trick to always get them right.Present participles, as we have just seen, can be adjectives, while gerunds can be nouns:The smoking lady was very rude. (Present participle)Smoking is bad for your health. (Gerund)On the other hand, we have the past participle (not to be confused with the past tense), which is the one that ends with –ed (or the third column in the table of irregular verbs).We already know it is used together with to have to form the perfect tenses:I have broken my leg. She will have written it by tomorrow.Apart from this, we can also use the past participle as an adjective and to form the passive voice:I love cooked meat. (Used as an adjective)The house was built. (Passive voice) How to Learn Tenses in EnglishLearning tenses can be quite boring sometimes, especially if you are trying to learn by yourself.Boring also means ineffective, so what can we do to learn fast without wasting our time?I have been teaching English for almost two decades (20 years) and I have used many different methods with my students. I have also been (and still am) on the other side of the teacher-student coin.I learn languages as a hobby, and I myself use different learning methods and techniques depending on the situation and the language.Many of my students love self-studying English, but they get lost sometimes, especially when they start learning the tenses.However, I have found there are some tips that are better than others when you want to learn English grammar tenses. Divide them into past, present and future to have three groups of four tenses. This division is great if you want to learn everything about a specific “chunk” (piece) of the line of time without worrying too much about the rest, so it is a good technique for beginner learners who are still not ready to mix points in time.For example, first you can focus on the present tenses, then the past tenses and then the future tenses. Divide them into pairs.Another way of dividing the different tenses is by making pairs. As you learn more, you will realize that very often tenses share certain features or like to appear together in sentences.There are different ways of making this division:Simple and continuous tenses: present simple and present continuous, past simple and past continuous, future simple and future continuous.Perfect and perfect continuous tenses: present perfect and present perfect continuous, past perfect and past perfect continuous, future perfect and future perfect continuous.Tenses that normally appear together in sentences: present simple and present perfect, present simple and present continuous, past simple and present perfect, past simple and past continuous, past simple and past perfect.These are only some examples.You can divide the tenses in a different way if you feel two (or more) tenses go together. I recommend this technique for intermediate and advanced learners because tenses get mixed and used together. Practice with online exercises and apps.There are millions of online resources you can use to practice tenses in English. And if you prefer learning on the go, you can also download one or more apps and use them to become a master of the language. Create your own sentences.I recommend you choose one tense at a time and practice writing sentences, negative sentences and questions with it.Write as many examples as you can think of, focusing on one tense at a time. This will help you memorize the structure of the tense in all its forms and allow you to use it more naturally. Watch series, movies and videos to see tenses in context.Context is everything, and the more context we have, the better we understand what is being said.The best thing about any type of native English video is that you are not only listening to native speakers talk (so you are practicing pronunciation) but also listening to full sentences in context.When you listen to a tense being used in context, you will be able to understand why it is being used, so you will know when to use it by yourself.FluentU is one resource that bases its English lessons on authentic native-level video content (including clips from movies and TV shows). Whenever you don’t understand what a certain tense means, you can just hover over the word and get more information about its definition and usage. Create flashcards for each tense and how they are used.You can do this in two separate decks (one for the uses of each tense and one for the way they are built), or put all the information together on both sides of a flashcard.Do whatever feels best for you. The most important thing is that you keep on practicing. Create your own short stories.This kind of exercise is recommended for intermediate and advanced learners.Think of a story and try to write three different versions of it, one in the past, one in the present and one in the future. At the beginning, this can feel a little bit difficult, but it will get easier as you go, I promise.You can write about anything you want, but I like to propose the following topics to my students:Daily routines (Describe yesterday, a normal day in your life and tomorrow.)Your lives (Who were you in a past life? Who are you now? Who do you want to be in the future?)Cities (Write about how they were in the past, how they are now and how you think they will be in 100 years.)Favorite singer/writer/actor (Choose one who is already dead and one who is still alive. For the future tense, write about your favorite alive artist in 10 years. Where will they be? What will they do? Will they be married? Will they have kids?)Think about an important historical event and write about it by using past tenses.Now imagine the same event is happening now. Change your story accordingly. Read, read, read!Reading is one of the best exercises we can do if we really want to understand tenses and learn how to use them properly.You will not think you are learning anything while you are reading, but the truth is that your brain is learning how to recognize different tenses and language structures that get repeated, and before you know it, you will start using English tenses like a boss. Listen to podcasts and the radio.Listening to English spoken by native speakers is also a superb way of practicing tenses.When you listen to proper English, much as when you read it, you are feeding your brain with correct structures. With time, your brain will recognize these structures and give you a hand when you want to say something in English. When Should You Learn the Tenses in English?You will eventually have to know all 12 English tenses, but you don’t need to learn them all from the start.We can say there are easy, less easy and difficult tenses, but I think that would be unfair. The present simple may be super easy for you, but your classmate might think it is difficult!However, there are certain tenses that, as you progress, you certainly need to know, understand and master if you want to go on to the next level.I have divided the 12 tenses into three levels (beginners, intermediate and advanced learners). Bear in mind this is my personal opinion based on all my years of teaching English. Some courses and official exam institutions can divide the tenses differently.What’s important here is that your knowledge of tenses goes hand in hand with the rest of your English skills. You should never know everything about, say, English vocabulary, but have only a vague (unclear, not precise) idea about basic English grammar. Beginner tensesThe beginner tenses are those that allow us to start expressing ourselves in English with basic grammar patterns and basic vocabulary. They help us survive the beginning of our learning journey, letting us build a solid “beginner’s foundation” of the language.These tenses are used mainly to describe the world around us, talk about what we did, do and will do, and they help us make sense of simple actions and events.The five tenses every beginner should know are (in this specific order, ideally): Intermediate tensesThe intermediate tenses go one step further and will be of help when you want to talk about more specific things.They are not difficult tenses to master, but they can make the difference between a beginner grammar newbie (beginner) and a serious intermediate grammar learner.The tenses I believe every intermediate learner of English should know are: Advanced tensesOnce you survive the intermediate level and officially become an advanced learner of English, there will be few things that remain a mystery for you.At this point, if you have not done it already, you will have to learn the rest of the tenses.An advanced user of any language is supposed to be able to talk about any topic without hesitation (doubt), write in English well and master tricky exercises that will allow you to do that. Depending on the app, you will find different types of exercises, like fill-in-the-blank, finish the sentence, choose the correct answer and more.Analyze dialogues/transcripts and understand why a tense was used. This is another awesome way of learning tenses. Almost every English sentence includes at least one of the 12 tenses. Analyze what you read and try to explain why a specific tense was used.Take online tests and quizzes on tenses to find out how you are doing. If your app has the option of taking quizzes, this will be a great way to check your progress and see which tenses you have to review.Listen to dialogues/podcasts/audio to hear native speakers use different tenses. You know already that the best way to learn English is by listening to native speakers talk. Just as you did with the transcripts before, write down and analyze the dialogues you listen to and try to explain why the speakers used a specific tense.Easily go back to any tenses that may be difficult for you and review them on the go. One of the most useful reasons for downloading an app to your phone is that it will always be with you, so you can review those harder tenses whenever you have some time, no matter where you are.Congratulations! You now have all the information you need about tenses in English.There’s a lot of interesting information in this post. Seriously, a lot. So take it one at a time.Tenses are the skeleton of a language. Without them, the majority of languages in the world would be lost in time.We need tenses, especially in English, in order to locate events and get to know what happened and when. This is super important, even at the beginning of your learning journey.So the earlier you start mastering the tenses in English, the better.Stay curious, my friends, and as always, happy learning! Francisco J. Vare loves teaching and writing about grammar. He’s a proud language nerd, and you’ll normally find him learning languages, teaching students or reading. He’s been writing for FluentU for many years and is one of their staff writers.





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