

Appendix H Verb Tenses

The tense of a verb helps tell us the time of an action or condition. The 12 traditional verb tenses are described briefly below. By tradition, tenses 1 through 5 are considered the core system of tenses.¹

Generally, teaching verb tenses to English learners involves helping students: 1) understand when the tense should be used; 2) understand the linguistic structure of the tense; and 3) understand the sometimes subtle differences between the tenses.

1. Simple Present

Habitual actions

- She washes her face every morning.
- We go to Mexico every May.

Statements of fact/general truths

- Friday comes after Thursday.
- Christians celebrate Christmas on December 25.

Perceptions, emotions, and relationships

- I know your sister.
- He loves vanilla ice cream.
- This book belongs to me.

In the subordinate clause when the independent clause is in the future tense

- He will clean his room after he eats dinner.

In the subordinate clauses of future conditional sentences

- If you come to my house, I will help you with your homework.

Expresses a future event at a specified date or time

- I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow.

Describing a present action

- The batter swings, and it's a home run!

Describing a past event in a story-telling fashion

- He looks me right in the eye and asks me to marry him.

¹ Celce-Murcia, Marianne and Diane Larsen-Freeman. *The Grammar Book*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 1983.

2. Present Progressive (also called continuous)

Event or action in progress

- She is exercising at the gym.

Temporary activity that will end at some point in the future

- We are living in an apartment right now.

Express a future event

- She is eating dinner with us tomorrow night.

Comment on present habit

- Henry always is talking during class.

3. Simple Past

A single completed action/ event in the past

- The boy played outside yesterday.

An ongoing completed action/ event in the past

- It rained every day last month.

An action/ event that spanned a specific time period but does not apply to the present

- We lived in Colorado for 10 years.

Past conditional or imaginative events in the subordinate clause

- If you attended class, you would understand the homework assignment.

4. Simple Future

An action/ event that will take place at a specific time in the future

- She will go to college next fall.
- She is going to college next fall.

An action/ event that will be ongoing in the future

- You and your husband will enjoy this new car.
- You and your husband are going to enjoy this new car.

Two interrelated actions/ events that may occur in the present and the future with a specific end in sight

- He will work at the store until he earns enough money for college.
- He is going to work at the store until he earns enough money for college.

In the main clause of future conditional sentences

- If you wait five minutes, I will drive you to the bus stop.
- If you wait five minutes, I am going to drive you to the bus stop.

5. Present Perfect

An action/event that started in the past and continues to the present

- She has been an American citizen for five years.

An action/event in the past that relates to the present

- I already have read that book.

An action/event that has been completed recently

- Students, you have finished the test.

With verbs in subordinate clauses of time or condition

- You will not get better until you have taken all of your medicine.

6. Past Progressive

An action/event in progress at a specific time in the past

- We were sleeping at 11:30 p.m. last night.

Two simultaneous actions/events in the past

- I was sleeping when you called.

An ongoing action/event in the past

- The baby was crying all day.

7. Future Progressive

An action/event that will be in progress at a specific time in the foreseeable future

- They will be sailing on the Pacific Ocean next week.
- They are going to be sailing on the Pacific Ocean next week.

An action/event that will be ongoing for a period of time beginning now and continuing to the future

- We will be living in Madrid for the next five years.
- We are going to be living in Madrid for the next five years.

8. Present Perfect Progressive

A habit/situation that started in the past and continues to the present

- He has been eating well since last May.
- They have been dating for three years.

An action/event in progress

- I have been studying for the SAT test.

9. Past Perfect

An action/event that was completed before another action/event

- They had sold their house before they moved to Houston.

In the subordinate clause of past conditional sentences

- If you had come with us, you would have been very tired.

10. Past Perfect Progressive

An action/event/habit taking place over a period of time in the past prior to another event in the past

- He had been exercising a lot before he broke his ankle.
- They had been living in New Orleans, but the hurricane destroyed their home.

11. Future Perfect

A future action/event that will be completed by a specific future time

- We will have visited 70 countries by next May.

A future action/event that will be completed before another future action/event

- She will have graduated from college by the time you find a new job.

12. Future Perfect Progressive

An ongoing action/event that is taking place in the present and will continue to a specific future time

- On May 10, I will have been living in this apartment for 30 years.