

Tense and aspect

What follows refers only to English. Languages deal with these two issues differently.

What's the difference between Tense and Aspect?

Tense refers to the time of an event and is often marked by a change in the verb ending. So we have, e.g.:

1. *Rita believes in ghosts* (present)
2. *Rita believed in ghosts* (past)

In fact, unlike most languages, English also has no inflection on the base form of the verb in many cases (*They believe in ghosts*) but it is still a present tense.

Arguably, English has no future tense because we don't have a form of the verb to signify future time. We denote the future in many ways – *She is going to talk to me, She will talk to me* etc. More of that later.

Aspect refers to how an event or state is **perceived** with reference to time. So we have, e.g.:

3. *Rita has broken the rule*
4. *Rita is breaking the rule*

Sentence 3 tells us not only that the rule was broken in the past but also that it has some relevance to the present. The fact that she has broken the rule will have consequences now.

Sentence 4 gives a different aspect. The *-ing* ending on the verb is called a present participle ending and in English that tells us that the event is happening now. Unfortunately, English present tenses are a bit complicated. Think what these actually mean and then [click here](#).

5. *Rita walks to school*
6. *Rita is walking to school tomorrow*
7. *Rita is walking to school now*

Sentence 5 is English implies that this is her habit, not necessarily what she is doing right now.

Sentence 6 is actually the present progressive used for a future event that has been arranged in some way.

Sentence 7 is the only one which is truly a present form.

Aspect and tense are very closely related. We can use other tenses with progressive (*be + -ing*) aspects and with perfective aspects (*have + the past participle of the verb*). Here are two examples:

8. *Rita had walked to school* (perfective aspect, past tense – we call this the past perfect tense)
9. Rita was walking to school (progressive aspect, past tense – we call this the past progressive tense)

Before we go on, here's a summary of the all the present and past tenses and aspects with their names, along with the future forms English also uses.

Example (form in italics)	Tense name
She often <i>speaks</i> to her boss	Present simple (habit)
She <i>is speaking</i> to her boss	Present progressive
She <i>spoke</i> to her boss	Past simple
She <i>was speaking</i> to her boss	Past progressive
She <i>has spoken</i> to her boss	Present perfect
She <i>had spoken</i> to her boss	Past perfect
She <i>has been speaking</i> to her boss	Present perfect progressive
She <i>had been speaking</i> to her boss	Past perfect progressive
She <i>will speak</i> to her boss	Future simple (factual future)
She <i>is speaking</i> to her boss tomorrow	Present progressive (future)
She <i>is going to speak</i> to her boss	'going to' future (intentionality)
She <i>will be speaking</i> to her boss	Future progressive (ongoing future)
She <i>will have spoken</i> to her boss	Future perfect (past in the future)
She <i>will have been speaking</i> to her boss	Future perfect progressive (past in the future)