

The English Tense System

← Past		Present	Future →		
I used to play <i>'used to' structure</i> (a discontinued habit)		I work I like dogs <i>present simple</i> (a current, past and future habit, situation or feeling)			
I had played <i>past perfect simple</i> (a past embedded in a past)		I ran <i>past simple</i> (an event in the past)	I am reading <i>present progressive</i> (a current event)	I am meeting John <i>present progressive</i> (a present arrangement)	I'll have got it <i>future perfect</i> (an event embedding the past in the future)
I had been running <i>past perfect progressive</i> (a progressive event)		I was running <i>past progressive</i> (a progressive past event)		I'm going to meet John <i>going to structure</i> (a present intention)	I'll have been working <i>future perfect progressive</i> (a progressive event embedding the past in the future)
		I have arrived <i>present perfect simple</i> (an event occurring in the past embedded in the present)		It's going to rain (a present prediction)	
		I have been running <i>present perfect progressive</i> (a progressive event occurring in the past embedded in the present)		I'll be 30 tomorrow <i>future simple</i> (a fixed future)	
				I will be meeting John <i>future progressive</i> (a progressive or matter-of-course event)	

What follows is not exhaustive but it covers the main uses of these tenses in English.

The fourth column contains examples of the tenses used in the passive.

The fifth column contains examples of typical time words associated with the tenses. It is **not** the time words which determine the tense use, it is the concept of the tense which determines appropriate time expressions.

Tense	Main uses	Examples	Passive forms	Typical time adverbials
Present simple	Repeated or habitual events	<i>I play tennis every Thursday</i>	<i>The work is done here</i>	every day, seldom, never, sometimes, usually, rarely, scarcely ever, often
	Generalisations	<i>Flamingos eat fish</i>	<i>Bears are seen in these hills</i>	
	Schedules	<i>The train arrives at 8</i>	<i>The class is timetabled to start at 9</i>	
	Present conditions (with some verbs only) representing continuous states	<i>I am here</i> <i>He needs money</i>	<i>More resources are needed</i>	
Present progressive	Current events	<i>He is writing a letter</i>	<i>A meeting is being held</i>	today, these days, now, this week, tomorrow, next Thursday
	Current (background) events which may not be occurring now	<i>He is writing a book</i> <i>He is studying French</i>	<i>The house is being decorated</i>	
	Currently arranged future	<i>I'm seeing the doctor tomorrow</i>	<i>Tomorrow's meeting is being held in Room 6</i>	
Past simple	Finished past action or condition	<i>I ate at six</i> <i>I lived in Brazil</i> <i>I was happy</i>	<i>Lunch was eaten at 6</i>	yesterday, last week, for years, at two, last month, that summer, at three, then, in those days, up to then
	Repeated or habitual past action	<i>I always ate at six</i>	<i>All our holidays were taken there</i>	
Past progressive	Interrupted past action	<i>I was eating when he rang</i>	<i>I was being told about it when she interrupted</i>	
	Progressive action at a particular time	<i>I was eating at 7</i>	<i>The car was being serviced then</i>	
	Discontinued or temporary past habit	<i>I was walking to work in those days</i>	<i>Calls were being handled by real people then</i>	
	Parallel past events or events	<i>It was raining and the wind was blowing hard</i> <i>I was eating while she was watching television</i>	<i>Trees were being uprooted and the roads were being flooded</i>	

Present perfect	A past embedded in the present which changes it	<i>I have spoken to him (so now he knows) I have learnt French (so now I can speak it) He has broken the pump (so now we can't use it)</i>	<i>The pump has been broken</i>	recently, today, this morning, just, already, yet, never, ever
	To describe past experiences which change the present	<i>I have been to America (so I can speak about it)</i>	<i>It has been explained to me</i>	
Present perfect progressive	To emphasise the duration of a long event embedded in the present which changes it	<i>I've been waiting for hours (and am really cold)</i>	<i>The road has been being repaired</i>	for years, since 1990, already, all my life, this month
	Events embedded in the present which change it and are still current (this is actually continuous, not progressive)	<i>She's been looking unwell for some time (and still is)</i>	<i>She has been being treated for it for weeks</i>	
	A series of past events embedded in the present which change it	<i>He's been stealing money from his employer</i>	<i>Money has been being stolen from his employer</i>	
Past perfect	Completed events before others embedded in the past which explain	<i>I had already spoken to her before he asked</i>	<i>The tables had been laid before the guests arrived</i>	already, before, beforehand, yet, when ...
	Completed long events before others embedded in the past which explain	<i>It had rained for a week and the garden was muddy</i>	<i>The garden had been soaked by the rain</i>	
Past perfect progressive	(Un)completed long events before events in the past	<i>I had been playing chess for two hours before he arrived</i>	<i>The game had been being played</i>	
	To show a past result of a previous event	<i>He had been working too hard and was exhausted</i>	<i>The work had been being badly done so ...</i>	
Future simple or <i>will</i> future	A present promise or offer The verb <i>will</i> represents willingness, not futurity	<i>I'll write soon, I'll do the washing up There's no butter! I'll go and get some.</i>	<i>That'll be done, I promise</i>	soon, at 2 o'clock, in two days, on Friday, in 2030, soon, after a while
	Predictions based on experience or hunches	<i>This will be difficult</i>	<i>The work won't please her</i>	
	Certain absolute futures	<i>I will be 45 on Monday</i>	<i>The clocks will be put forward</i>	
Future progressive	Potentially interrupted action	<i>He'll be working when you come</i>	<i>The game will be being brought to an end when you arrive</i>	
	Progressive future event happening as a matter of course at a specific time	<i>I'll be working at 7</i>	<i>Your statements will be being taken</i>	

Future perfect	Completed event before another which affects the second	<i>He'll have finished the book by the time I want it</i>	<i>The book will have been written before the show</i>	by then, by Thursday, by the time ..., before ..., beforehand, for years
	To show causal connections between future events	<i>He'll have repaired the car and then we can use it</i>	<i>The car will have been repaired</i>	
	Events occurring before future events (certain verbs only) which change the second event	<i>I'll have been at the hotel for a day or two before I can call you</i>	<i>The manager will have been asked the question many times</i>	
Future perfect progressive	Future progressive events or events before other events with relevance	<i>I will have been working for over two hours before you get here</i>	<i>The house will have been being decorated</i>	
	To show causal connections between long events and states	<i>He'll have been travelling for ten hours and will be tired</i>	<i>The car will have been being driven too fast and ...</i>	
<i>going to</i>	To express current intention	<i>I'm not going to put up with it</i>	<i>That is going to be done by me</i>	tomorrow, soon, afterwards, before 6
	To express prediction based on current evidence or experience	<i>Look at those clouds. It's going to rain any minute</i>	<i>The coming rain is going to spoil the party</i>	
<i>used to</i>	Past habits (generally only for events)	<i>I used to drink lots of coffee I used to take my holidays in Spain</i>	<i>This used to be done here</i>	then, in those days, at that time

The passive structures in brown are disputed. Some aver that perfect progressive forms do not allow the passive but these forms are available if rarely used.