

VERB TENSE

Introduction: Verbs are words that describe action (e.g., *Sarah modified her plans for the bridge.*), states of being (e.g., *Tim is a mechanical engineer.*), or conditions (e.g., *It is cold outside.*). Verbs fall under four categories: form, tense, mood, and voice. This handout will focus on one of these categories: tense.

Verb Tenses

English verb tenses often confuse non-native speakers because of the way English combines time (tense) and action in verbs. However, the English verb tense system is actually a hierarchical structure that subdivides into related categories (see Table A). At the top of the hierarchy are three basic time periods: present, past, and future. Below each of these are four kinds of action: simple, continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous. Difficulties often arise when attempting to select the appropriate tenses to convey the intended action, state of being, or condition. Tense indicates the order of events and the nature of the event in time.

Table A: Verb Tenses with Examples and Explanation of Usage:

Present	Simple	He <u>walks</u> to work everyday. The law of gravity <u>is</u> irrefutable.	Expresses habitual activity: it happens regularly States facts, feelings, or opinions
	Continuous	She <u>is walking</u> to work now. Tomorrow, I <u>am meeting</u> with the client.	States an activity that is in progress. States future plans.
	Perfect	He <u>has walked</u> all the way from Edmonton. He <u>has walked</u> that far before.	Expresses a completed action in the recent past or expresses abstracted experience.
Past	Perfect Continuous	She <u>has been walking</u> since 6:30 this morning.	Emphasizes the duration of an activity that began in the past but is continuing in the present.
	Simple	He <u>walked</u> to work yesterday.	Expresses an action completed at a defined point in the past.
	Continuous	She <u>was walking</u> when I met her.	States an activity that was in progress at a specific point in the past; often, as in the example, the point is a point of interruption.
	Perfect	He <u>had walked</u> to work, before he met the group.	Expresses an action completed in the past, before another action, also past.
	Perfect Continuous	She <u>had been walking</u> to work for years when decided to buy a bike.	Expresses the duration of an activity in the past before another past action.

Future	Simple	He <u>will walk</u> to work tomorrow.	Expresses future action or prediction.
	Continuous	He <u>will be walking</u> the dog after work.	Expresses an action at a particular point in the future.
	Perfect	He <u>will have walked</u> the dog by the time we eat dinner.	Expresses an action complete in the future before another action in the future.
	Perfect Continuous	He <u>will have been walking</u> for an hour before we even set out.	Expresses the duration of an action in the future before another future action.

(Text and tables adapted by Tom Robles, Writing Instructor, The Writing Centre, UTSC from: *Engineering Communication: From Principles to Practice* by Robert Irish and Peter Weiss. Copyright 2009 by Oxford University Press)