

# English Verb Tenses

Verbs are one of the most powerful parts of speech to learn in English. Verbs show the action in a sentence. One thing that is challenging about learning English verbs is that every verb in English has a tense and an aspect. **Verb tense** tells us the general time frame that we are talking about. **Verb aspect** basically tells us the status of the verb in relation to the time frame: Is it still happening? Is it complete? The three verb tenses and four verb aspects combine to make 12 total verb forms. This article is a good starting point for understanding the English verb system.

## Simple Verb Tenses

The three simple tenses are the **simple present**, **simple past**, and **simple future**. Verbs in simple tenses make up about 85% of spoken English. Simple tenses show actions and states at a point in time, but they aren't always specific.



**SIMPLE PRESENT**  
THE ACTION HAPPENS ALWAYS, USUALLY, OR REGULARLY

PAST ————— NOW ————— FUTURE

EXAMPLES  
MICHAEL JOGS EVERY DAY.  
HE USUALLY JOGS AT NIGHT.

ginseng

The infographic shows a horizontal timeline with 'PAST' on the left and 'FUTURE' on the right. A vertical line marks 'NOW'. Five small figures of a person jogging are positioned along the timeline, spanning across the 'NOW' line, indicating a continuous or regular action.



**SIMPLE PAST**  
THE ACTION HAPPENED AT A SPECIFIC TIME IN THE PAST

PAST ————— NOW ————— FUTURE

EXAMPLES  
MICHAEL JOGGED YESTERDAY.  
HE JOGGED LAST NIGHT.

ginseng

The infographic shows a horizontal timeline with 'PAST' on the left and 'FUTURE' on the right. A vertical line marks 'NOW'. A single small figure of a person jogging is positioned in the 'PAST' section, indicating a completed action at a specific time.



**SIMPLE FUTURE**  
THE ACTION WILL HAPPEN AT A SPECIFIC TIME IN THE FUTURE

PAST ————— NOW ————— FUTURE

EXAMPLES  
MICHAEL WILL JOG TONIGHT.  
HE IS GOING TO JOG AT 9:00.

ginseng

The infographic shows a horizontal timeline with 'PAST' on the left and 'FUTURE' on the right. A vertical line marks 'NOW'. A single small figure of a person jogging is positioned in the 'FUTURE' section, indicating an action that will occur at a specific time.

## Continuous Verb Tenses

We use the continuous aspect (also called *progressive aspect*) to show that an action is in progress at a specific time. The action starts before and finishes after that specific time. The three continuous verb tenses are the **present continuous**, the **past continuous**, and the **future continuous**.



**PRESENT CONTINUOUS**  
THE ACTION IS HAPPENING NOW. IT STARTED IN THE PAST AND ENDS IN THE FUTURE.

PAST ————— NOW ————— FUTURE

EXAMPLES  
MICHAEL IS JOGGING.  
HE IS JOGGING RIGHT NOW.

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The infographic shows a horizontal timeline with 'PAST' on the left and 'FUTURE' on the right. A vertical line marks 'NOW'. A group of small figures of people jogging is positioned across the 'NOW' line, indicating an action in progress.



**PAST CONTINUOUS**  
THE ACTION STARTED BEFORE AND ENDED AFTER ANOTHER ACTION OR TIME IN THE PAST.

PAST ————— NOW ————— FUTURE

EXAMPLES  
MICHAEL WAS JOGGING WHEN I ATE.  
HE WAS JOGGING AT 9:00.

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The infographic shows a horizontal timeline with 'PAST' on the left and 'FUTURE' on the right. A vertical line marks 'NOW'. A group of small figures of people jogging is positioned in the 'PAST' section, indicating an action in progress at a specific time in the past.



**FUTURE CONTINUOUS**  
THE ACTION WILL START BEFORE AND END AFTER ANOTHER TIME OR ACTION IN THE FUTURE.

PAST ————— NOW ————— FUTURE

EXAMPLES  
MICHAEL WILL BE JOGGING AT 9:00.  
HE WILL BE JOGGING WHEN WE EAT.

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The infographic shows a horizontal timeline with 'PAST' on the left and 'FUTURE' on the right. A vertical line marks 'NOW'. A group of small figures of people jogging is positioned in the 'FUTURE' section, indicating an action in progress at a specific time in the future.

## Perfect Verb Tenses

Perfect verb forms are generally used to show that an action is complete before another action or a point in time. The three perfect tenses are **present perfect**, **past perfect**, and **future perfect**.

**PRESENT PERFECT**  
THE ACTION FINISHED SOMETIME BEFORE NOW. SPECIFIC TIME IS NOT IMPORTANT.

**EXAMPLES**  
MICHAEL HAS JOGGED.  
HE HAS JOGGED ALREADY.

**PAST PERFECT**  
THE ACTION FINISHED BEFORE ANOTHER ACTION OR TIME IN THE PAST.

**EXAMPLE**  
MICHAEL HAD ALREADY JOGGED  
WHEN WE ATE.

**FUTURE PERFECT**  
THE ACTION WILL BE FINISHED BEFORE ANOTHER TIME OR ACTION IN THE FUTURE.

**EXAMPLES**  
MICHAEL WILL HAVE JOGGED AL-  
READY WHEN WE EAT.

## Perfect Continuous Verb Tenses

Generally, perfect continuous verbs show that an action or situation in progress just before, and until another time or action. Often we use the perfect continuous tenses to show how long the perfect continuous action happened for (its duration). As Anna Ananichuk nicely puts it, “the perfect progressive describes the completed part of a continuous action.” The three perfect continuous tenses are **present perfect continuous**, **past perfect continuous**, and **future perfect continuous**.

**PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS**  
THE ACTION CONTINUED FOR A SPECIFIC AMOUNT OF TIME BEFORE NOW OR STARTED RECENTLY.

**EXAMPLES**  
MICHAEL HAS BEEN JOGGING.  
HE HAS BEEN JOGGING FOR AN HOUR.

**PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS**  
THE ACTION CONTINUED FOR A SPECIFIC AMOUNT OF TIME BEFORE ANOTHER TIME IN THE PAST.

**EXAMPLES**  
MICHAEL HAD BEEN JOGGING FOR  
AN HOUR WHEN WE ATE.

**FUTURE PERFECT CONTINUOUS**  
THE ACTION WILL CONTINUE FOR A SPECIFIC AMOUNT OF TIME BEFORE ANOTHER ACTION OR TIME IN THE FUTURE.

**EXAMPLES**  
MICHAEL WILL HAVE BEEN JOGGING  
FOR AN HOUR WHEN WE EAT.

## Passive Verb Forms

The passive voice is used to emphasize the receiver of the action, rather than the doer of the action. There are many reasons we choose to do this in English. Any of the 12 verb tenses can be transformed into the passive voice.