

# Tenses

Tenses are an important feature of writing and speaking in English to indicate the time of an event, i.e., when something takes place. Correct tense use is critical in academic writing. There are 12 tenses.

## Simple tense

### 1. Present simple

This is used to discuss something true or factual, or to generalise about some observation, e.g.,

- *I **play** the guitar.*
- *Smith **is** an academic.*

### 2. Past simple

This is used to describe a completed action, e.g.,

- *I **played** the guitar [in the past - I am not playing right now].*
- *Smith **was** an academic [before his current occupation].*

### 3. Future simple

This is used to describe an action one intends to do in the future, e.g.,

- *I **will play** guitar [given the opportunity to do so].*
- *Smith **will be** an academic [given the opportunity to be one].*

## Perfect tense

The perfect tense is used to indicate a “perfected” or completed action or event using the verb “*have/had*” (along with helping verbs).

### 4. Present perfect

This is like the present simple with the addition of the verb ‘to have’, carrying the implication that a completed action or event continues up until now, e.g.,

- *I **have played** guitar in a band [and still could].*
- *Smith and Jones **have published** many papers [and could publish more].*

### 5. Past perfect

This is like the past simple with the addition of ‘to have’ carrying the implication that one completed past event occurred before another completed past event, e.g.,

- *I **had played** guitar in a band long before the band became famous.*
- *Smith and Jones **had published** papers before they both retired.*

### 6. Future perfect

This is like the future simple with the addition of ‘to have’ carrying the implication of a connection between two completed events in the future, e.g.,

- *I **will have to play** guitar in a band before I become famous [in the future].*
- *Smith and Jones **will have to publish** papers before being promoted [in the future].*

## Continuous (or “progressive”) tense

The continuous tense is focussed on an *ongoing action* in progress at a determinate or indeterminate time.

## 7. Present continuous

This is used to describe something happening in the present that continues into the future [*am/are + ing* form of verb], e.g.,

- *I am playing guitar* [right now!]
- *Smith and Jones are publishing papers* [and will continue to do so].
- *Interest rates are rising around the world.*

## 8. Past continuous

This is used to describe something that started or happened in the past and continued until a particular, specified time in the past [*was/were + ing* form of verb], e.g.,

- *I was playing guitar in a band when the 'phone rang.*
- *Smith and Jones were publishing papers when they were made redundant from their jobs.*
- *The share prices were rising around the world when I invested my money.*

## 9. Future continuous

This is used when describing something in the unspecified future that is in progress at another specified time in the future [*will + be + ing* form of verb], e.g.,

- *I will be playing guitar when the 'phone rings.*
- *Smith and Jones will be publishing papers until they retire from their jobs.*
- *I will be investing in the share market tomorrow.*

## 10. Present perfect continuous

This is used to describe something that started at some unspecified time in the past and which has continued to the unspecified time in the present [*has/have + been + ing* form of verb]. It is also used when we are interested in incomplete outcomes or results\*, e.g.,

- *I have been playing guitar for a long time* [= and I am getting much better at it].
- *Smith and Jones have been publishing papers for many years* [= and are still doing so].
- *\*He has been waiting for an opportunity to take over the company* [= and still hasn't].

## 11. Past perfect continuous

This is used to describe an unspecified past event which continued until or just before another unspecified past event [*had been + ing* form of verb], e.g.,

- *I had been playing guitar for about ten years.*
- *Smith and Jones had been publishing papers for decades when they called an end to their partnership.*
- *I had been working for years in the same job when head-hunted by another company.*

## 12. Future perfect continuous

This is used to describe something in the unspecified future that will continue until being finished at an unspecified future time [*will have been + ing* form of verb], e.g.,

- *I will have been playing guitar for many years before I perform on stage.*
- *Smith and Jones will have been publishing papers for many decades before they get promoted.*
- *I will have been waiting for an hour before being considered for the job.*

## Other helpsheets available

- Punctuation
- Capitalisation
- Writing in an Academic Style
- Writing in the Third Person