

VERBS: PAST TENSE

WHAT IS A VERB?

A verb is a part of speech that expresses action, occurrence, or a state of being. Actions, occurrences, and states of being can happen at different points in time, so verbs change form in order to express that timing. These forms of verbs are called tenses.

To create the correct tense of a verb, writers and speakers start with a base form of the verb, which is the infinitive form (e.g., “to read”) without the “to,” and then they add different endings and sometimes an auxiliary (helping) verb.

Most verbs follow the same pattern for each tense, though some will change their form differently. These are called irregular verbs. Let’s use the Present Simple tense as an example. For most verbs you take the base verb form and sometimes add the ending “-s” or “-es” (e.g., “to open” becomes “opens”). However, the irregular verb “to have” turns into “has.”

Below we very briefly explain the rules for verb tenses used to express action that has happened in the past: Past Simple, Past Continuous, Past Perfect, and Past Perfect Continuous. If you need more assistance with verb tenses, please schedule a meeting with a Writing Center Consultant or search online for more comprehensive resources.

PAST SIMPLE

The Past Simple tense is used to describe completed past actions, often with the time or date given. This tense used in positive statements is created by using the base verb form plus an “-ed” ending.

This tense in negative statements is created by adding “did not”/“didn’t” and the base verb form. Questions in this tense are formed by adding “did” before the noun/pronoun and the base verb form after the noun/pronoun.

Positive

We **wanted** pizza for dinner last night.

Negative

She **didn’t go** to a movie.

Question

What major **did** you **choose**?

Please note, irregular verbs are an exception, though most irregular verbs act the same as regular verbs for negative statements and questions in the Past Simple forms. A notable irregular verb that we want to point out is “to be.” The past form of “to be” changes into “was” for singular nouns and “were” for plural nouns. When writing a negative statement and asking a question, however, you do not use “did” with “to be.”

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Positive

She **was** too tired to come.

Negative

We **weren't** home last night.

Question

Where **were** you?

PAST CONTINUOUS

The Past Continuous tense is used to describe past activities that happen over time or ongoing past activities interrupted by another activity. Past Continuous is formed by using the past tense of the verb “to be” (“was”/“were”) before the base verb form and adding the ending “-ing” to the base verb form. Irregular verbs act the same as regular verbs in Past Continuous tense.

Positive

We **were eating** lunch when you called.

Negative

They **weren't having** a good time at the party.

Question

Who **were** you **talking** to when I came by?

PAST PERFECT

The Past Perfect Tense is used to express action that happened before another action in the past. Past Perfect is formed by adding the past tense of the verb “to have” (“had”) and adding the ending “-ed” to the base verb form.

Positive

I looked out the window and saw that it **had rained**.

Negative

He knew that she **had not lived** here for several years.

Question

Had you **watched** this show before it moved to a different streaming service?

Please note, irregular verbs are an exception and have their own Past Perfect forms.

PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS

The Past Perfect Continuous tense is used to express action that occurred before another point in time in the past. This tense is used to highlight that an action has continued over a period of time; whereas, the Past Perfect tense highlights the completion of the action.

The Past Perfect Continuous is formed by adding the past tense of the verb “to have” (“had”), the past participle form of “to be” (“been”), and the ending “-ing” to the base verb form. Irregular verbs act the same as regular verbs in Past Perfect Continuous tense.

Positive

I looked out the window and saw that it **had been raining**.

Negative

He knew that she **had not been living** here for several years.

Question

Had you **been watching** this show before it moved to a different streaming service?