7

The Tense–Aspect System: Perfect and Progressive

English combines two tenses (past, present) and two aspects (progressive, perfect) into a rich system. This chapter completes the picture begun in Chapters 3 and 4, focusing on the perfect forms that give learners the most trouble.

7.1 Overview of the system

	Simple	Progressive	Perfect
Present	*she writes*	*she is writing*	*she has written*
Past	*she wrote*	*she was writing*	*she had written*
Future	*she will write*	*she will be writing*	*she will have written*

Perfect and progressive can combine: *she has been writing*, *she had been writing*, *she will have been writing*.

7.2 The present perfect

Form: *have/has* + past participle (*worked*, *gone*, *seen*, *written* — see Appendix A).

Key Point

The present perfect connects the past to *now*. Use it when the time is indefinite or the situation continues into or affects the present. Never use it with a finished-time expression: ✗ *I have seen him yesterday.* → ✓ *I saw him yesterday.* / ✓ *I have seen him today.*

7.2.1 Main uses

1. **Life experience (time not stated):** *She **has visited** forty countries. **Have** you ever **eaten** oysters? I **'ve never read** 'Ulysses'.*
2. **Recent events with present relevance:** *I **'ve lost** my keys (so I can't get in now). The taxi **has arrived** (it's outside now).* Often with *just*, *already*, *yet*: *They **'ve just left**. I **'ve already paid**. **Hasn't** the post **come yet**?*
3. **Unfinished periods:** *I **'ve drunk** three coffees **today**. She **'s been** ill **this week**.*
4. **States continuing to now, with *for*/*since*:** *We **'ve lived** here **for** ten years / **since** 2015.*

Key Point

for + a length of time (*for two hours*, *for ages*); *since* + a starting point (*since Monday*, *since I was a child*). ✗ *I know her since 2019.* → ✓ *I have known her since 2019.* (Many languages use

the present here; English requires the present perfect.)

7.2.2 Present perfect vs. past simple

Present perfect	Past simple
time unstated or unfinished	finished, stated or implied time
I've been to Rome. (experience)	*I went to Rome in June.*
She has worked here for years. (still does)	*She worked here for years.* (no longer)
Have you seen Anna? (recently — where is she?)	*Did you see Anna?* (e.g. at yesterday's party)

Usage Note

American English often uses the past simple where British English prefers the present perfect, especially with *just, already, yet*: AmE *Did you eat yet? I already saw it.* BrE *Have you eaten yet? I've already seen it.* Both are standard within their varieties.

7.2.3 *been* vs. *gone*

*She has **gone** to Paris* (she is there, or on the way now).
*She has **been** to Paris* (she went and came back — experience).

7.3 The present perfect progressive

Form: *have/has been + -ing*.

1. **Duration of an activity up to now**, emphasizing the process: *I've **been studying** for three hours.* (focus: the activity and its length)
2. **Recent activity with visible results:** *Why are your hands dirty? — I've **been gardening**.*
3. **Repeated recent actions:** *She's **been calling** me all morning.*

Compare result vs. process: *I've **painted** the kitchen* (finished — result) vs. *I've **been painting** the kitchen* (activity — perhaps unfinished, or explaining the smell of paint). With *how long*, prefer the progressive for activities: *How long **have** you **been waiting**?* With stative verbs, use the simple perfect: *I've **known** her for years* (✗ *I've been knowing*).

7.4 The past perfect

Form: *had* + past participle. It places one past event *before* another past reference point:

- *When we arrived, the film **had** already **started**.* (starting happened first)
- Compare: *When we arrived, the film **started**.* (arrival first, then the start)
- *She told me she **had never seen** snow before.*
- After *after, before, by the time, as soon as*: *By the time the police came, the thieves **had escaped**.*

Usage Note

The past perfect is not needed for every earlier event — only when the order matters and is not already clear. With *before/after*, the simple past is often fine: *She left after the meeting ended.* Do not chain long narratives entirely in the past perfect; establish the earlier time,

then continue in the past simple.

The **past perfect progressive** (*had been + -ing*) is the past version of the present perfect progressive: *Her eyes were red — she **had been crying**. We **had been driving** for six hours when the engine failed.*

7.5 Future perfect and future progressive

- **Future progressive** (*will be + -ing*): an action in progress at a future time — *This time tomorrow, I'**ll be flying** to Tokyo.* Also polite inquiries: *Will you be using the car tonight?*
- **Future perfect** (*will have + participle*): completion by a future deadline — *By Friday, we **will have finished** the report.*
- **Future perfect progressive**: duration up to a future point — *In June, I'**ll have been working** here for twenty years.*

Common Error

After time conjunctions (*when, after, before, until, as soon as, by the time*), use a *present* form for the future, not *will*: ✗ *I'll call you when I will arrive.* → ✓ *I'll call you when I arrive.* ✓ *We'll leave as soon as the rain stops / has stopped.*

Exercises

Exercise 7.1 Present perfect or past simple?

Choose the correct form.

1. Shakespeare (has written / wrote) 37 plays.
2. I (have known / knew) Julia since university.
3. (Have you ever tried / Did you ever try) Vietnamese food?
4. We (have moved / moved) house three times when I was a child.
5. The company (has grown / grew) rapidly since 2020.
6. Sorry, I (have missed / missed) your call earlier this morning. (it is now afternoon)

Exercise 7.2 Simple or progressive perfect?

Put the verb in the present perfect simple or progressive.

1. You're out of breath. _____ (you/run)?
2. She _____ (write) three novels so far.
3. How long _____ (they/learn) Japanese?
4. I _____ (read) that book for weeks and I'm still only halfway through.
5. Someone _____ (eat) all the biscuits — the tin is empty!

Exercise 7.3 Past perfect

Combine the events into one sentence using the past perfect where appropriate.

1. The train left at 9:00. We reached the station at 9:10. (By the time. . .)

2. She spent all her money. Then she asked her brother for a loan. (After… / She asked… because…)
3. He never flew before. He was nervous at the airport.

Exercise 7.4 Future forms

Complete with future progressive or future perfect.

1. By 2030, the city _____ (build) three new metro lines.
2. Don’t phone at 8 — we _____ (have) dinner then.
3. In October, they _____ (be) married for 25 years.