16

Advanced Tense and Aspect

At advanced level, tense choice becomes a matter of perspective and rhetoric, not just rules. This chapter examines the subtler corners of the system.

16.1 Aspect as viewpoint

Aspect does not locate an event in time; it chooses a *camera angle* on it:

- **Simple** = the event as a complete whole, a fact: *She wrote the report.*
- **Progressive** = the event from inside, unfolding, boundaries out of view: *She was writing the report.*
- **Perfect** = the event looked back on from a later vantage point, with current relevance: *She has written the report.*

Because aspect is viewpoint, the same real-world situation can often be described with different aspects, with different rhetorical effects: *I **read** your thesis last night* (done, whole) vs. *I **was reading** your thesis last night* (scene-setting, possibly unfinished, invites continuation).

16.2 Narrative tenses

Skilled narration interleaves four past forms:

Past simple the storyline's events, in sequence: *She **opened** the letter and **froze**.*

Past progressive backdrop and interrupted actions: *Rain **was falling** as the train pulled out.*

Past perfect flashbacks — earlier than the storyline: *The letter confirmed what she **had** long **suspected**.*

would* / *used to habitual past within narration: *Every evening her father **would read** aloud by the fire.*

Style & Register

The **historic present** narrates past events in the present tense for vividness — standard in jokes, plot summaries, headlines, and increasingly in literary fiction and conversational storytelling: *So yesterday this man **walks** into the office and **demands** to see the manager…* In academic writing, the present is also used for timeless reference to texts: *Orwell **argues** that political language corrupts thought.*

16.3 The future in the past

To express what was still ahead at a past moment:

- *would*: *He didn't know it then, but he **would become** president.* (fate/retrospective certainty)

- *was/were going to*: unfulfilled intention — *We **were going to call** you, but it got too late.*
- *was/were to + infinitive*: formal destiny or arrangement — *The meeting **was to take place** in Geneva. She **was never to see** him again.*
- *was/were about to*: imminence — *I **was about to leave** when the phone rang.*

16.4 Subtleties of the present perfect

16.4.1 Time-frame test

The present perfect requires a time frame that includes *now*. This explains contrasts such as: *Have you seen the exhibition?* (it is still on) vs. *Did you see the exhibition?* (it has closed). Similarly *this morning*: *I've written three emails this morning* (still morning) vs. *I wrote three emails this morning* (it is now afternoon).

16.4.2 Hot news and its afterlife

Journalism introduces news with the present perfect and then shifts to the past simple for details: *A tornado **has struck** northern Texas. The storm **touched down** at 6 p.m. and **destroyed** dozens of homes.* This two-step pattern is worth imitating.

16.4.3 Present perfect with future reference

In time clauses, the present perfect stresses completion before the main event: *I'll email you **when I've finished** the draft.* Compare: *when I finish* (near-synonymous, less emphasis on the completed result).

16.5 Progressive nuances

- **Politeness and tentativeness:** *I **was wondering** if you could help me. **Were** you **wanting** to see the manager?* (past progressive distances and softens)
- **Temporary behaviour vs. character:** *You're **being** very generous today* (behaviour now) vs. *You **are** very generous* (character).
- **Emotional colouring with *always*:** *He's **always borrowing** money and forgetting to pay it back.* (affectionate or irritated exaggeration)
- **Future progressive as neutral future:** *Will you **be joining** us for dinner?* avoids the pushiness of *Will you join us?* — it asks about the course of events, not the person's will.

16.6 Perfect infinitives and gerunds

Non-finite forms also carry perfect aspect, for anteriority:

- *He claims **to have met** the president.* (meeting before claiming)
- *She was sorry **to have missed** the ceremony.*
- *I regret **having spoken** so bluntly.*
- *The suspect denied **having been** anywhere near the scene.*
- Unrealized past intention: *I **was to have chaired** the session, but I fell ill. I meant **to have replied** sooner.*

Exercises

Exercise 16.1 Narrative tenses

Put each verb into the most natural narrative form.

1. By midnight the guests _____ (leave), and Elena _____ (clear) the table when she _____ (notice) the envelope someone _____ (slip) under the door.
2. When I was small, my grandmother _____ (tell) me a story every night before I _____ (go) to sleep.

Exercise 16.2 Future in the past

Rewrite the bracketed idea with an appropriate future-in-the-past form.

1. At that time nobody suspected that the company [collapse within a year].
2. Sorry we didn't wait — we [leave] just as you texted.
3. The ceremony [be held] outdoors, but the storm forced it inside.

Exercise 16.3 Choose and justify

Choose the better form and explain the nuance in one sentence.

1. (Did you ever meet / Have you ever met) my grandfather? (he died last year)
2. You (are / are being) ridiculous — stop pretending you can't hear me.
3. I (wondered / was wondering) whether you might read my draft.
4. The committee announced that a decision (was / had been) reached the previous evening.