

Chapter 6

Time, Tense, and Aspect of Verbs

Abstract In the previous chapter, we began our observation of verbs as a class. In this chapter, we will be examining how English verbs function to express the time of an event (tense) and information regarding the duration or completion of an event (aspect). The chapter is divided into five sections. Section 6.1 reviews verb inflections one more time and introduces the concept of time, tense, and aspect. Sections 6.2–6.5 delve into the different English verb tenses: Sect. 6.2 looks at the present; Sect. 6.3 the past; Sect. 6.4 the future; and Sect. 6.5 the perfect.

Keywords verb tenses • present tenses • progressive tenses • aspect • perfect tenses

6.1 Section 1: Verbs and Inflections

You may recall our discussion in Chap. 1 of how early English grammarians attempted to impose Latin and Greek grammatical concepts and terminology onto English and how these are often inadequate for describing the structure of English. This is particularly true in the case of verbs because English is a language that does not inflect to show tense to the degree that Latin, Greek, and many other European languages do. Traditional descriptions of English verb tenses are often unsatisfactory, complicated, and confusing. This chapter attempts to present clearly the essentials of English verbs and time reference in view of what ESL/EFL learners need to know when learning English.

We have examined verb inflections in various chapters previously. Each time we have emphasized that in English form is not equal to function. We have also observed repeatedly that although English has only eight inflections, these inflections cause many of the difficulties ESL/EFL learners encounter. The following chart summarizes again the inflections for English verbs.

English Verb Inflections			
he, she, it	–s	simple present tense, 3rd person singular	walks
I, you, we, they, he, she, it	–ed	simple past tense	walked

Are you saying that these inflections show all the verb tenses?

As you look at this chart, you may be thinking to yourself that there is something missing. How can only these two inflections reflect all the possible time references in English? They cannot, which leads us to a key point of this chapter: Verbs show little inflection in English, but there are many ways to show time references. Most commonly, verbs combine with the auxiliaries *have* and *be* to show what is known as *aspect*.

6.1.1 Time, Tense, and Aspect

What does aspect mean? Why can't we just say tense?

In English, the grammatical labels *past* and *present* do not necessarily correspond to time in the real world, but rather to grammatical features of the verbs. English uses a variety of structures to express different time references. One important structure that functions together with tense is *aspect*. Aspect refers to how English indicates temporal features such as duration, frequency, and completion.

Aspect is indicated by composite tenses. This means that the verb phrase is composed of an auxiliary verb + a main verb. There are two different aspects in English: the progressive and the perfect. In the previous chapter in our discussion of the auxiliary verbs *have* and *be*, we saw how these two auxiliaries help main verbs.

When *be* combines with main verbs, the verb phrase shows the *progressive* aspect.¹ We use the label *progressive* because the verb phrase describes the ongoing nature of an event or action. A progressive verb phrase consists of the auxiliary *be* in either present or past tense + the present participle of the main verb.

Progressive Aspect			
subject	auxiliary <i>be</i>	present participle (verb + <i>-ing</i>)	time reference
Taylor	is	walking.	present
Taylor	was	walking.	past

¹Some grammar texts use the term *continuous* rather than progressive.

When *have* combines with a main verb, the verb phrase shows the *perfect* aspect. The perfect aspect describes the relationship between an earlier event or action with a later event or action. A perfect verb phrases consists of the auxiliary *have* in either present or past tense + the past participle of the main verb.

Perfect Aspect			
subject	auxiliary <i>have</i>	past participle (verb + <i>-ed</i>) ^a	time reference
Taylor	has	walked.	present
Taylor	had	walked.	past

^aThere are numerous irregular past participles. See Appendix A

Because the regular past tense *-ed* and the past participle *-ed* inflections look identical, some grammar books refer to the past participle inflection as the *-en* inflection to differentiate it from the past inflection. This reference is derived from the fact that a number of common irregular past participles take an *-en* inflection on the verb (e.g., *eaten*, *driven*, *written*).

Try the next three Discovery Activities and see how much you already know about time, tense, and aspect. Be sure to check your answers after you complete each Discovery Activity in the Answer Key before you move on to the next Discovery Activity. This will help you if you are having problems with any of the activities.

In this chapter, all the discussions and answers are in the Answer Key.

Discovery Activity 1: Time 1

- Look at the following pairs of sentences.
- All the sentences refer to present time. Try to explain the differences.

A.	B.
The children walk to school.	The children are walking to school.
The dog barks.	The dog is barking.
She is sick.	*She is being sick.

Discovery Activity 2: Time 2

- Look at the following pairs of sentences.
- All the sentences refer to past time. Try to explain the differences.

C.	D.
The children walked to school.	The children were walking to school.
The dog barked.	The dog was barking.
She was sick.	*She was being sick.

Discovery Activity 3: Time 3

1. Look at the following pairs of sentences.
2. All the sentences refer to past time. Try to explain the differences.

E.	F.
The children walked to school.	The children have walked to school.
The dog barked.	The dog has barked.
She was sick.	She had been sick.

Now that you have a general idea of time, tense, and aspect, we will explore the different verb tenses of English and the different ways English refers to time and aspect.

6.2 Section 2: Present

6.2.1 Simple Present

The first thought many people have when seeing the phrase *simple present tense* is that this refers to something taking place now. Yet, as illustrated by the sentences in Discovery Activity 1: Time 1, present time generally does not refer to events taking place now. Instead, the label *present time* refers to general habits, customs, characteristics, or truths. If speakers wish to refer to an action occurring at the moment of speaking, they use the *present progressive*. An important exception to this is the *narrative present*, that is, when a speaker describes in narrative form a series of events such as in a play-by-play account of a sporting event.

The simple present tense consists of the main verb in its simple form, except in 3rd person singular when the *-s* inflection is added to the main verb. You will recall from Chap. 5 that for questions and negatives in the simple present and past, we need to add the *do* auxiliary. As we observed in that chapter, the *do* auxiliary is a filler verb. It must be there to fulfill a grammatical requirement of English but has no semantic meaning. The sentence types in present tense are summarized in the chart below.

Sentence Types: Simple Present Tense				
auxiliary	subject	auxiliary (+not)	verb	sentence type
	The girl We		walks. walk.	affirmative
	The girl We	does not do not	walk. walk.	negative
Does Do	the girl we		walk? walk?	question

What can I tell my students about when to use the simple present tense?

6.2.1.1 Uses of Simple Present

The simple present is frequently explained as describing *timeless* events, that is, referencing something that has no terminal point. Often frequency adverbs, such as we saw in Chap. 4, are used in conjunction with the simple present to express the frequency of an event or action:

Maggie and Katie *always* drink coffee at breakfast.
I *never* take the bus home.
George *usually* calls before he comes.

Guidelines: Simple Present	
Simple present is used to:	
• describe repeated actions, customs, habits	Nick <i>leaves</i> for school at 8:00. Casey and her brother <i>work</i> at a bank.
• describe general truths or facts	The sun <i>rises</i> in the east. The president and his family <i>live</i> in the White House.
• describe certain characteristics, mental states, emotions, senses • <i>feel</i> , <i>smell</i> , <i>taste</i> used intransitively, with the idea of using one of the “five senses” • <i>hear</i> , <i>see</i> used transitively with the idea of using one of the “five senses” ^a	Gina <i>is</i> thin. The sky <i>looks</i> gray. Good teachers <i>understand</i> their students. Ma <i>loves</i> pizza. Helen <i>seems</i> happy. A baby’s skin <i>feels</i> smooth. The soup <i>smells</i> delicious. The noodles <i>taste</i> salty. The audience <i>hears</i> the orchestra tuning up. The worshippers believe God <i>sees</i> everything.
• narrate stories and events	“And the batter hits the ball into the outfield for another home run for the Yankees.” “She gets up, turns on the oven, leaves the room, and the next thing you know, there’s smoke coming out of the kitchen.”
• summarize stories, articles	The president addresses the soldiers and asks for their continued support in the fight against terrorism. The reviewer argues that the conclusions presented by the researchers are erroneous.

^aThese are the linking verbs, introduced in Chap. 5. *Feel*, *smell*, *taste*, *hear*, and *see* are also called verbs of perception or sensory verbs

• *Learner difficulties*

A common problem among ESL/EFL students is using simple present tense when referring to something happening now when native speakers would prefer the present progressive.

More significantly for ESL/EFL learners are problems using the *do* auxiliary correctly, an issue explored in the previous chapter. To recap briefly, learners frequently forget to insert *do* in questions and negatives and/or to inflect *do* and the main verb correctly.

If the present tense doesn't refer to something happening now, which tense does refer to current events or happenings?

6.2.2 Present Progressive

The progressive aspect shows the ongoing nature of an event. Progressive verbs are composite verbs. We call them composite verbs because they have more than one part. All progressive verbs require *be* + present participle. This means we need the *be* auxiliary in the appropriate tense (present or past) plus the present participle (*-ing*) of the main verb. The auxiliary tells us the time, and the present participle indicates the aspect or the duration of an event or action. The *present progressive* describes events occurring now, at the moment of speaking. Because it describes present time, the auxiliary verb *be* must be either *am*, *is*, or *are*.

As we saw in Chap. 5, when an auxiliary verb is already part of the verb phrase, it is not necessary to use *do* to form questions or negatives. Instead, we invert the subject and the auxiliary verb to form questions. For negatives, we place *not* after the auxiliary. The sentence types are summarized below.

Sentence Types: Present Progressive				
auxiliary	subject	auxiliary (+not)	present participle	sentence type
	Jenny	is	leaving.	affirmative
	Jenny	is not	leaving.	negative
Is	Jenny		leaving?	question

Don't we sometimes use the present progressive to refer to events that take place over a relatively long period of time?

The concept of *now* is subjective in the mind of the speaker. Generally, when teaching the present progressive to beginning learners of English, teachers emphasize the aspect *now* or *at this moment*. As learners become more proficient,

it is necessary for them to be exposed to more subjective uses of *now* reflecting longer periods of time, yet still temporary and contrasting with the timeless sense of the simple present. For example, consider these sentences:

He is studying at Cornell University.

They are living in Europe.

He is studying at Cornell University can refer to a time period of four years and *They are living in Europe* can refer to a decade. So while these are current events in the mind of the speaker, they are not “current” or “now” in the sense often conveyed by ESL/EFL grammar texts.

In summary, the present progressive is used to describe temporary events and actions that have a beginning and an end. Although this time period may be relatively long, the key point is that it is temporary and limited. By using the progressive aspect, speakers emphasize the duration of an event or action, whether this duration is momentary, short, or relatively long.

What is difficult about the present progressive for ESL/EFL learners?

- ***Learner difficulties***

A key difficulty with composite verbs such as the present progressive is remembering both parts of the verb phrase: *be* and the present participle. ESL/EFL learners often forget the *be* auxiliary in attempting to form the present progressive and will produce incomplete verb phrases such as:

*We **going** home.

*I **e-mailing** you about my problem.

If you are not confident that you can clearly identify the present progressive, you will find it helpful to complete Discovery Activity 4. Note that many of the examples use the contracted forms of *be*, which we saw in a previous chapter.

Discovery Activity 4: Present Progressive

1. Read the following excerpts.
2. Underline the verbs in the present progressive. Be sure to underline all parts of the verb phrase.

A.

“What are they doing?”

... They’re putting down their names,” the Gryphon whispered in reply, “for fear they should forget them before the end of the trial.” [Carroll, L. (1865). *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland*. Available at https://www.adobe.com/be_en/active-use/pdf/Alice_in_Wonderland.pdf]

B.

Dean asked Leach, “Chief, how come everybody’s hanging around in the barracks?”...

Leach grinned broadly at him. “Well, Dean, nobody’s doing any work because this is Saturday. We’re all on liberty.” [Sherman, D., & Cragg, D. (1997). *Starfist: First to fight. Book I* (pp. 117–118). New York: DelRey.]

C.

“I’m taking a few days off, to see an old friend who’s dying of cancer,” said Joe Burner. “I have at this date twenty-seven friends who are dying of cancer.” [Cheever, J. (1959). *The wapshot scandal* (p. 188). New York: Harper & Row.]

The next Discovery Activity allows you to see how the simple present tense is used in narratives. The purpose of this activity is to help you to clarify your thinking so that you can better explain to your learners why in certain situations we use the simple present and not the present progressive, even though the events are occurring now.

Discovery Activity 5: Simple Present, Not Present Progressive

Read the following excerpts.

1. Underline the verbs in the excerpts.
2. Explain why the simple present tense is used in these two excerpts. For example, in Excerpt A, we see the present tense used with *now*, even though *now* is generally associated with the present progressive. Why is this so?

A.

You *now* face a new world, a world of change. The thrust into outer space of the satellite spheres and missiles marks a beginning of another epoch in the long story of mankind... We deal *now*, not with things of this world alone, but with the... unfathomed mysteries of the universe. [MacArthur, D. (1962, May 12). General Douglas MacArthur reminds West Point cadets of duty, honor, Country. In W. Safire (Ed.). *Lend me your ears: Great speeches in history* (rev. ed., p. 72). New York: Norton.]

B.

I run into Jane on the street. We speak of a woman we both know whose voice is routinely suicidal. Jane tells me the woman called her the other day at seven a.m. [Gornick, V. (1996). Approaching eye level. In P. Lopate (Ed.), *Writing New York: A literary anthology* (p. 137). New York: The Library of America.]

Can we use all verbs in the present progressive?

6.2.2.1 Verbs not Used in Present Progressive

Some verbs are not usually used in the present progressive. These are usually non-action verbs, also called *stative* verbs (think “state” as in “state of mind”) because they describe:

- states
- attitudes
- perceptions
- emotions
- existence

These verbs are used in the present tense, even when describing something taking place now. The following chart lists some of the more common stative verbs.

Common Stative Verbs					
believe	hear	know	please	see	think
feel	(dis)like	love	prefer	smell	understand
hate	guess	mean	recognize	suppose	want
have	imagine	need	remember	taste	wish

Are stative verbs difficult for ESL/EFL learners?

- *Learner difficulties*

ESL/EFL learners may not know or forget which verbs are generally not used in the present progressive and produce sentences such as:

*I’m preferring to go home now.
*She’s not believing me.

An area of confusion for ESL/EFL learners lies in the different meanings certain stative verbs have when they are used in the simple present versus when they are used in the present progressive. Some stative verbs have different and often idiomatic meanings when they are used in the present progressive.

Consider, for instance, the common greeting card line, *I’m thinking of you*. Here the present progressive form emphasizes that you are keeping that person in your thoughts at this time. Contrast this with the statement, *I think he’s right*. In this instance, you are stating a thought.

Discovery Activity 6 focuses on distinguishing the meaning of some of the stative verbs when used in the present tense and in the present progressive.

Discovery Activity 6: Simple Present, Present Progressive, and Change in Meaning

1. Look at the following pairs of sentences in A and B.

2. Explain the differences in meaning.

A	B
1a. A rose smells sweet.	2a. The children are smelling the rose.
1b. The noodles taste salty.	2b. The chef is tasting the noodles.
1c. I see without glasses.	2c. They are seeing their father this weekend.
1d. What do you think of Brad Pitt?	2d. I'm thinking of going to Moscow.
1e. Joe is a bad boy.	2e. Joe's being a bad boy.
1f. Connor has a girlfriend.	2f. Scott is having a sandwich.

6.3 Section 3: Past

6.3.1 Simple Past

The simple past is used to describe completed past actions or events. As we have seen, there is only one past inflection for all regular past tense verbs, the *-ed* added to the verb. There are many irregular past tense forms, including some of the most common verbs in English: *went*, *had*, *ate*, *drank*, *wrote*, *drove*, *was*, and *were*.

To form questions and negatives, simple past tense verbs require the past form of the *do* auxiliary, *did*, as we saw in Chap. 5. Remember also that the main verb is in simple or base form, that is, with no inflections or *to* before it.

The different sentence types in simple past are summarized below.

Sentence Types: Simple Past				
auxiliary	subject	auxiliary (+not)	verb	sentence type
	Sue		walk ed .	affirmative
	Sue	did not	walk.	negative
Did	Sue		walk?	question

Do ESL/EFL learners have problems with the did auxiliary?

• *Learner difficulties*

The *did* auxiliary is difficult for many ESL/EFL learners. They have the same problems using this auxiliary in the simple past that they have with using it with the simple present. These problems include:

- forgetting to insert *did* for questions and negative statements.

 *They **no wanted** her help.

- using *did* together with the *–ed* inflection or the irregular form of the verb, rather than leaving the main verb in its base form.

 *She **didn’t liked** that story.
 ***Did** he **went** home already?

- using *do* instead of *did*.

 *They **don’t** want to come last night.

If all regular past tense verbs take the same –ed inflection, why does the ending sound different? We pronounce walked with a “t” sound but pronounce called with a “d” sound.

6.3.1.1 Pronunciation of *–ed*

Although there is only one past tense inflection for regular verbs, there is a difference in pronunciation when the *–ed* inflection is added. The change in pronunciation depends on what **sound** the verb ends in. The different pronunciations of *–ed* are not reflected in written English. Be careful not to confuse the *spelling* with the *pronunciation* of the final sound of a verb before the addition of the *–ed*. The following chart shows the different pronunciations of the *–ed* inflection.

Pronunciation of <i>–ed</i>		
final sound of verb	pronunciation of <i>–ed</i>	examples
verbs that end in the sounds <i>p, k, f, s, sh, and ch</i>	<i>t</i> sound	help ed , bak ed , cough ed missed, wash ed , pitch ed
verbs that end in the sounds <i>d</i> or <i>t</i>	<i>id</i> sound, extra syllable added	want ed , need ed
all other verb sound endings <i>b, g, v, z, zh, th, j, m, n, ng, l, r,</i> or vowel sound	<i>d</i> sound	rob bed , drag ged , shav ed , buzz ed , garag ed , breath ed , rag ed , blam ed , ruin ed , ping ed , call ed , order ed , ow ed , play ed , ralli ed

It is important to emphasize with ESL/EFL learners that the pronunciation of *-ed* depends on the final **sound** of a verb, and **not the spelling** of the verb. The verb *cough*, for instance, is not spelled with an *f* but has an *f* sound; the verb *fix* is written with an *x* but has a final *s* sound. Both *cough* and *fix*, therefore, take the *t* pronunciation of the *-ed* past tense inflection.

Discovery Activity 7 provides practice both in identifying past tense verb and in recognizing the different pronunciation patterns of *-ed*. You may need to refer back to the chart above to help you remember the pronunciation rules.

Discovery Activity 7: Past Tense Identification and Pronunciation

Look at the excerpts.

Part I

1. Underline the past tense verbs. There are regular and irregular verbs.
2. For the irregular verbs you underlined, write the base form.

A.

Gently, I tugged at the knot, pulling it carefully apart... Her shiny brown hair was thick, but the brush glided down... Her shoulders relaxed, and then she sighed deeply. [Shapiro, R. (2004). *Miriam the medium* (p. 81). New York: Simon & Shuster.]

B.

He ran across the lawn and leaped over the three white wood steps. His heel struck the slate floor of the porch. He skidded but righted himself without having to grab the railing. He looked back at Danny and Encyclopedia and grinned cockily. When he got no answer to the doorbell, Bugs walked a step to the window that faced onto the porch. He rapped on the glass. [Sobol, D. (1996). *Encyclopedia Brown finds the clues* (p. 19). New York: BantamSkylark.]

C.

When Mrs. Frederick C. Little's second son arrived, everybody noticed that he was not much bigger than a mouse. The truth of the matter was, the baby looked very much like a mouse in every way... Mr. and Mrs. Little named him Stuart, and Mr. Little made him a tiny bed out of four clothespins and a cigarette box.... Every morning before Stuart dressed, Mrs. Little went into his room and weighed him on a small scale. [White, E. B. (1945). *Stuart Little* (pp. 1–2). New York: HarperCollins.]

Part II

3. List the verbs you underlined and label their pronunciation. Explain the pronunciation rule for each labeled verb.

4. Check your answers with those in the Answer Key at the end of the chapter.

- If you made any mistakes, review the *-ed* pronunciation rules above.

Example:

My sister watched me
watched pronounced with t sound because base verb ends in ch sound.

Do ESL/EFL learners have problems remembering the different pronunciation patterns?

- ***Learner difficulties***

ESL/EFL learners have difficulty remembering whether the *-ed* should be pronounced with a *t* or a *d* sound and whether the extra syllable needs to be added in spoken English. Since the differences are not reflected in written English, oral practice is an important means for helping students master the different pronunciations of *-ed*. In addition, since there are many different irregular past tense forms, learners need extensive opportunities, both oral and written, for practicing these forms. There are spelling changes for many of the regular verbs, which learners also need to become familiar with and practice (see Appendix C).

Are there other past verb tenses?

For one, English has the past progressive, to which you were briefly introduced earlier in the text.

6.3.2 Past Progressive

The past progressive describes ongoing events or actions in the past. The past progressive is a composite verb consisting of the auxiliary *be* + the present participle of the main verb. It is formed just like the *present progressive* except *be* is now in past form (*was/were*). The auxiliary *was/were* indicates time (past), and the present participle indicates the ongoing nature (aspect) of the event or action.

Since the past progressive is a composite verb with an auxiliary, we form questions by simply inverting the subject and auxiliary. To make a sentence in the present progressive negative, we place the *not* after the auxiliary. The sentence types are summarized below.

Sentence Types: Past Progressive				
auxiliary	subject	auxiliary (+not)	present participle	sentence type
	Jenny	was	leaving.	affirmative
	Jenny	was not	leaving.	negative
Was	Jenny		leaving?	question

When do we use the past progressive?

Some general guidelines for the past progressive are:

Guidelines: Past Progressive		
Past progressive is used when:		
an event or action that was happening when another event or action interrupted it	She <i>was driving</i> home when the rain started. My computer crashed while I <i>was e-mailing</i> you.	<i>when</i> before clause containing the simple past verb phrase <i>rain</i> indicates action interrupting another one, <i>was driving</i> <i>while</i> introduces the ongoing action <i>was e-mailing</i> interrupted by <i>crashed</i>
to emphasize the ongoing nature of an event or action in the past	She <i>was working</i> all morning. It <i>was raining</i> the whole night.	focus on the long duration of <i>was working</i> and <i>was raining</i>
an event or action that was already happening at a particular time in the past	Nathan <i>was studying</i> at midnight.	<i>was studying</i> underscoring Nathan studying before, at, and probably after, midnight

Why do we often use the past progressive + the simple past together?

The past progressive and simple past are often used together to contrast two actions or events. The past progressive emphasizes the ongoing nature of the one event or action. The simple past emphasizes the single occurrence of the other. When both the past progressive and simple past occur in a sentence, the order in which the two verb phrases occurs can vary, usually with *when* and *while*. *When* is used with the simple past and *while* is used with the past progressive.

	Past Progressive		Simple Past
	We were eating	when	Joyce called.
While	we were eating,		Joyce called.

The order of these sentences can be changed to:

	Simple Past		Past Progressive
When	Joyce called,		we were eating.
	Joyce called	while	we were eating.

I often hear people using when and not while before the past progressive. Is that wrong?

According to the rules of prescriptive grammar, *while* must occur before the past progressive and *when* before the simple past. Native speakers, however, will commonly substitute *when* for *while* before the past progressive. ESL/EFL learners need to be aware of the usage rule, particularly in formal writing, but they should also be aware that this rule is often ignored, particularly in casual writing and speech.

The next Discovery Activity provides practice in recognizing the past progressive and the simple past. If you are confident in your knowledge of these two verb tenses, you may wish to skip this activity.

Discovery Activity 8: Past Progressive and Simple Past

Look at the following excerpts.

1. Underline the past progressive verb phrases and label them **PProg**.
2. Underline the simple past verb phrases and label them **SP**.
3. Explain the time represented by each of the past progressive verb phrases.

Example:

When he entered the room, he didn't see anyone at first, but then he noticed that I was sitting in the corner with Cecily and James.

entered = SP
didn't see = SP
noticed = SP
was sitting = PProg

was sitting describes action happening when something else (*he noticed*) occurred

A.

... I remember the time last fall we were playing kickball. We were losing, like, nine to nothing. We scored a bunch of runs in the last inning. And you kicked a grand slam to win it, ten-nine. [Fletcher, R. (1998). *Flying solo* (p. 101). New York: Yearling.]

B.

... I saw Cara and Rory in my mind. I knew Cara was sitting on her bed and Rory in the rocking chair. He was leaning forward, his elbows at his knees. He looked in control. I blinked away the vision. I didn't want to interfere ... I had to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" in my head ... By the time I reached "The rocket's red glare," Cara was screaming, "I hate my life! I can't live like this!" As I ran to the steps, Rory was coming down. [Shapiro, R. (2004). *Miriam the medium* (p. 139). New York: Simon & Schuster.]

The next section explores how we talk about future time in English. English does not have a verb that inflects for future time but makes use of different structures to refer to future time.

6.4 Section 4: Future

Some languages have no future tense and rely on other means such as time expressions (e.g., *tomorrow*) to express future events. Other languages have specific inflectional endings attached to the verbs to express future tense. English is a language that relies on a variety of structures to express future time. These different structures, all of which have different nuances of meaning, are often confusing to ESL/EFL learners. There are rules to guide learners in their choice of structures, but it is important to stress that these rules are not absolute rules. Rather, they are general guidelines of use, depending upon the meaning the speaker wants to convey. Learning the different structures for expressing future time is not as difficult for ESL/EFL learners as is mastering which structure to use in which context.

How is the future usually expressed in English?

The most common ways to refer to future time in English are *will* and *be going to*. Neither construction is a simple tense. *Will* is an auxiliary verb, which must be followed by a main verb in its base form:

We *will* study.

There are no inflections on either *will* or the main verb.

Another very common way to refer to the future is the structure *be going to*.

They *are going to* come.

Although *will* and *be going to* are similar in meaning, they are not identical and cannot always be used interchangeably.

6.4.1 Will²

This future structure is the one traditionally referred to as the English future tense, although it is less commonly used than *be going to* + verb.

Because *will* is an auxiliary verb, we follow the first auxiliary rule for questions and negative statements. When *will* and *not* are contracted, the form changes to *won't*.

Sentence Types: Will				
auxiliary	subject	auxiliary (+not)	simple verb	sentence type
	The students	will	study.	affirmative
	The students	will not/won't	study.	negative
Will	the students		study?	question

Do we ever use shall to refer to the future?

ESL/EFL learners who have had exposure to British English will have learned that *shall* is the preferred form for *I* and *we*. In American English, however, *shall* is used primarily in questions requiring agreement or permission, such as *Shall we go?* *Shall I turn off the lights*, or found in legal terminology with the meaning of obligation or duty.

What are the rules for using will?

There are some general guidelines, not rules, for the use of *will*:

Guidelines: Will and Future Time	
Will is used to:	
refer to planned future events, arrangements, schedules.	Nordstrom's <i>will begin</i> holiday shopping hours tomorrow. A formal dinner <i>will conclude</i> the meeting. Northbound trains <i>will depart</i> at 10 min past the hour.
make predictions that are not completely certain or definite.	Gas prices <i>will drop</i> soon. The center of the hurricane <i>will continue</i> to gain strength.
express immediate decisions or intention.	Neil: "I forgot my wallet." Bart: "I'll <i>get</i> the check." Jack: "And then I'll <i>take</i> you home to get it."
make a promise.	We'll <i>review</i> the material again before the test. I'll <i>invite</i> them over next week.

At this juncture we return to the other future time construction, *be going to*.

²The future auxiliary *will* is different from the main verb *will* meaning bequeath, as in *She willed her estate to her grandchildren*.

6.4.2 *Be Going To*

While some grammar texts focus on *will* as the future tense in English, the most commonly used future form is *be going to*. We only use *will* under the relatively limited circumstances listed above. *Be going to* is generally considered a “fixed” structure with a particular meaning, although some texts describe *be going to* as the present continuous form of *go* plus the *to* infinitive of the verb.³

Since *be* is an auxiliary verb in the structure *be going to*, we follow our first auxiliary rule in forming negative statements and questions:

Sentence Types: Future <i>Be Going To</i>				
auxiliary	subject	auxiliary (+not)	going to + verb	sentence type
	Jackie and Sam	were	going to stay.	affirmative
	Jackie and Sam	were not	going to stay.	negative
Were	Jackie and Sam		going to stay?	question

When do we use be going to?

Guidelines: <i>Be Going To</i> and Future Time	
<i>Be going to</i> is used to:	
• predict an event, happening, action.	<i>It's going to rain</i> tomorrow.
• express a prior plan, that is, something speakers intend to do in some future time that they planned or decided to do previously.	Mr. Jones is tired of all the cold weather in New York. He's <i>going to retire</i> to Florida next year.

Note that *It will rain* could be substituted for *It's going to rain*. Either *will* or *be going to* can be used to make a prediction that is true or that is likely to happen in the future. In the next sentence, on the other hand, only *He's going to retire* can be used. When we refer to a prior plan or intention about a future event, we prefer to use *be going to*. As you see, the distinctions between *will* and *be going to* are not exact and are only approximate guidelines to help ESL/EFL students understand and use the two structures.

Discovery Activity 9 will provide you with more insights into the use of *will* and *be going to*. When you have completed both Parts I and II of this Discovery Activity, check your answers.

³The term *infinitive* in English is used to describe *to* + verb when the *to* is part of the verb.

Discovery Activity 9: *Will* versus *Be Going To*

Part I

1. Look at Excerpts A and B.
2. Try substituting *be going to* for *will*.
 - Is the meaning the same? Why or why not?

A.

“Sir, under the constitution of our Confederation, you have the right to a fair and speedy trial. As the supreme judicial power in this quadrant of Human Space, I guarantee you will get one ... The Fleet Judge will assist you in finding counsel ... ” [Sherman, D., & Cragg, D. (1997). *Starfist: First to fight. Book I* (p. 149). New York: DelRey.]

B.

“You will have a substitute teacher tomorrow,” Mrs. North told her third-grade class ... “I will be gone for one week,” said Mrs. North. “I won’t be back until next Thursday ... ” “I will leave detailed instructions for the substitute,” she warned. “And if any of you misbehave, I will know about it ... ” [Sachar, L. (1994). *Marvin Redpost: Alone in his teacher’s house* (pp. 1–2). New York: Random House.]

Part II

1. Look at Excerpts C and D.
2. Now try substituting *will* for *be going to*.
 - Is the meaning the same? Why or why not?

C.

“I have to meet Mrs. North in the parking lot. She’s going to drive me in her car...”
 “She’s going to pay me to take care of her dog while she’s away [said Marvin].”
 [Sachar, L. (1994). *Marvin Redpost: Alone in his teacher’s house* (p. 5). New York: Random House.]

D.

The sea thundered loudly, and a large wave rose up like a hand. It seemed to grab the tiny boat and hurl it right at the shore. Right at the jagged rocks. “Oh, no! Galen’s going to hit the rocks! He’s going to crash!” [Abbott, T. (2000). *The secrets of Droon: Quest for the queen* (p. 12). New York: Scholastic.]

Do ESL/EFL learners have trouble remembering which future construction to use?

• *Learner difficulties*

There are several difficulties ESL/EFL learners have with the two future constructions. For one, they may use one structure when the other is preferred. When referring to a prior plan or intention about a future event, native speakers use *be going to*. When referring to a person’s willingness to do something in the future, native speakers use *will*. When one future structure is substituted for the other, a different meaning may be conveyed:

meaning: willingness	meaning: plan or intent
Abbey: We need more milk.	Abbey: We need more milk.
Nancy: I’ll get it.	Nancy: I’m going to get it.

Although native speakers have no difficulty understanding the future meaning learners are trying to convey, they may be struck by the “oddness” of the use of one construction over the other in a particular context.

Another difficulty for learners of English is remembering to include all parts of the future with the *be going to* verb phrase. They may leave out the *be* auxiliary and produce such sentences as:

*I *going* to write him.

Adding *to* after *will* rather than using just the main verb alone is something ESL/EFL may also do:

*They will *to* change the law.

Are there any other ways to express future time?

6.4.3 *Present Progressive for Future*

English also uses the present progressive with a time expression to indicate close future time, especially with verbs of direction or motion.

Present Progressive for Future		
subject	present progressive	time expression
The plane	is leaving	tonight at 8:00.
We	are coming	tomorrow.
Her parents	are visiting	next Monday.
I	am starting	next week.

6.4.4 Future Progressive

The future progressive consists of *will + be + the present participle*. The future progressive is not used nearly as often as *will* or *be going to*, but ESL/EFL learners should be aware of this tense and its use.

Future Progressive	
Future progressive is used to:	
• emphasize the ongoing nature of an event or action in the future.	We <i>will be working</i> on this project for a long time.
• indicate the duration of a future event or action at a future point in time.	The children <i>will be sleeping</i> by 10 p.m.
• emphasize closeness to present time, especially when used together with <i>soon</i> .	Vacation <i>will be starting</i> soon.
• indicate a good guess or a supposition regarding an upcoming event or action.	If we don't get back to work soon, they <i>'ll be docking</i> our pay again.

What happens to our auxiliary rule for questions and negatives when there is more than one auxiliary?

You will notice that the future progressive has two auxiliaries: *will* and *be*. Earlier we said that whenever there is an auxiliary, this auxiliary takes the initial position in questions:

We *are* sleeping. → Are we sleeping?
He *will* leave soon. → Will he leave soon?

We now have to refine our rule to state that whenever there is more than one auxiliary verb present, **only the first auxiliary** is moved to the initial position:

The children **will** *be* sleeping by 10 p.m. →
Will the children *be* sleeping by 10 p.m.?

We also said previously that in forming a negative statement, we place *not* after the auxiliary (or attach it if it is a contraction). We now need to refine this rule to state that when there is more than one auxiliary, *not* comes after the **first** auxiliary (or attaches to it if it is a contraction).

First Auxiliary Rule for Negative Statements and Questions	
Negative statements: • If there is more than one auxiliary verb, place <i>not</i> after the first auxiliary verb. • If there is no auxiliary verb, insert the <i>do</i> auxiliary and add <i>not</i>.	She hasn't <i>been</i> sleeping well. They will not <i>be</i> helping us after all. Esther doesn't <i>like</i> fried green tomatoes.
Questions: • If there is one or more auxiliary verb, invert the first auxiliary verb and the subject. • If there is no auxiliary verb, insert the <i>do</i> auxiliary before the subject and keep the main verb in its simple or base form.	Has she <i>been</i> coming to class regularly? Will you <i>be</i> taking any final exams? Does Serena <i>play</i> tennis?

In the next section, we will be examining the perfect tenses, all of which have at least one auxiliary, *have*. All questions and negatives in the perfect tenses follow the rules we have just refined. Because perfect tenses refer to less specific times than the tenses we have explored up to now, they are often referred to as indefinite tenses. These indefinite tenses are also more difficult for many ESL/EFL learners to understand and master.

6.5 Section 5: The Perfect

6.5.1 Present Perfect

You will recall that the present perfect consists of the auxiliary verb *have* + past participle of the main verb. Regular past participles are the same as the past tense of the verb (e.g., *walked*, *camped*, *loaned*). Irregular past participles have various forms (see Appendix A). To form negative statements and questions, we follow our first auxiliary rule.

Sentence Types: Present Perfect				
auxiliary	subject	auxiliary (+not)	past participle	sentence type
	Sue	has	walked.	affirmative
	Sue	has not	walked.	negative
Has	Sue		walked?	question

When do we use the present perfect?

6.5.1.1 Uses of the Present Perfect

Traditionally, the present perfect is described as referring to indefinite time, that is, to events or actions that start in the past and extend into the present and even possibly into the future. The present perfect is generally presented in contrast to the simple past, which describes events that are over and completed.

The present perfect tense can be difficult for ESL/EFL learners because there is much variation as to when it is used. However, learners will have fewer problems if we regard the present perfect as occurring in two primary ways: **stable** and **variable** (Marshall 1989). By stable usage, we mean that there are two instances when the present perfect is always used.

6.5.1.1.1 Stable Time

The present perfect is used to express *continuative* or *durative* time, that is, to describe an event or action that occurs over a period of time. This is stable time. The present perfect often co-occurs with such expressions of time as *for* and *since*.

I *have lived* here **for** 10 years.
She *has studied* English **since** 2003.

When do we use for and when do we use since?

The table below outlines when *for* and *since* are used.

<i>For</i>	
• precedes a length of time: 10 years, 2 months, 5 days, a long time	They’ve wanted to move to a new house <i>for</i> many years.
• tells how long an event or action has continued up to the present	Dorothy has played the violin <i>for</i> years.
<i>Since</i>	
• precedes a point in time: 2010, last month, Saturday, 8 p.m.	They’ve waited for him to call <i>since</i> last night.
• tells when the event or action began	Margot has had allergies <i>since</i> she was a child.

The present perfect is also used to express *repeated* time, that is, an event or action that occurs more than once. Frequency or time expressions often co-occur with this use of the present perfect. In this sentence, the speaker is telling us about the repetition of the event by using the frequency adverb *always*:

Andy *has always lived* in New York.

In the following sentence, the speaker is indicating the repeated nature of the action by including *at least 20 times*:

That's my favorite movie. I *have seen* it **at least 20 times**.

In this last example, the speaker uses *numerous* to give us a sense of the repetition of the event and the frequency:

Florida *has had* **numerous** hurricanes.

All three sentences are examples of stable time.

6.5.1.1.2 Variable Time

The present perfect is also used for what is commonly called *indefinite* time. Here the present perfect is used to describe events or actions that ended in the recent past but *without a specific time marker* to indicate when they ended or occurred. The time is unspecified. It is *variable* time because we can choose either the simple past and present perfect with little or no change in meaning. Choice of one tense over another when referring to one event or action occurring in the recent past is dependent on context, the region of the United States, and the speaker.

Group A	Group B
Cleo just took her exams.	Cleo has just taken her exams
Ethan already took his exams.	Ethan has already taken his exams.

Both sets of sentences in Groups A and B include the time adverbs *just* and *already*. The time indicated by these adverbs does not specify anything about when or how often these actions or events occurred. This differs from the adverbs we saw used in the examples under stable time.

Note also that unlike *for* and *since*, *just* and *already* can occur with either the past tense or the present perfect. Although *just* and *already* are often taught together with the present perfect, ESL/EFL learners need to be aware that these adverbs can occur with the simple past, depending upon the context and intent of the speaker.

Discovery Activity 10 is designed to help you identify the present perfect. If you do not need to practice this, move on to the next section.

Discovery Activity 10: Identifying the Present Perfect

Look at the excerpts and underline the present perfect verb phrases.

A.

"An armed man need not fight. I haven't drawn my gun for more years than I can remember." "Come to think about it, I haven't pulled mine in four years or more."
[Heinlein, R. (1942/1997). *Beyond this horizon* (p. 276). New York: ROC Books.]

B.

The evidence provided by radioactive dating, along with observations of long-term geological processes, has enabled geologists to compile a remarkably accurate history of life on our planet. Using these data, scientists have determined that the Earth is about 4.5 billion years old. By combining radioactive dating, relative dating, and observations of important events in the history of life on Earth, scientists have divided the 4.5 billion years into larger units called eras ... Unlike the periods of time we use daily, the components of geological time do not have standard lengths. [Miller, K., & Levine, J. (2000). *Biology* (p. 276). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.]

C.

Researchers have documented many cases of evolution in action, some of which involve organisms that have devastating effects on the lives of humans ... Certain insect pests have evolved resistance even to the very latest pesticides. [Miller, K., & Levine, J. (2000). *Biology* (p. 303). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.]

Is the present perfect difficult for ESL/EFL learners?

- ***Learner difficulties***

The present perfect requires extensive practice in authentic contexts since learners often have difficulty using this tense correctly. In many cases, they will substitute the simple past, the simple present, or the present progressive for the present perfect. This arises in part because these other three tenses seem more “logical” to them in terms of time progression and sequence.

ESL/EFL learners may overuse present perfect, partly because they associate certain expressions such as *for*, *since*, *just*, *already*, and *How long...* ? exclusively with the present perfect. They also have trouble using *for* and *since* correctly.

In addition, the subject pronouns, *he*, *she*, and *it*, when contracted with the auxiliary *has* may be confused by ESL/EFL learners with the contracted auxiliary *is*. Both *has* and *is*, when contracted, are written as *'s*.

He's come. He *has* come.

He's here. He *is* here

In spoken American English, *has* and *is* are reduced to a “z” sound and sound identical. In addition, in spoken American English the *'s* contraction is a reduced sound and does not receive any stress in speech. Learners, therefore, may not even hear it and be unaware of the *'s*; they will need oral practice in learning to distinguish these contractions.

Does the auxiliary have or has only contract with subject pronouns?

Subject pronouns and also noun phrases are often contracted in spoken English:

<i>My friend's</i> eaten.	My friend <i>has</i> eaten.
<i>The dogs've</i> jumped over the fence.	The dogs <i>have</i> jumped over the fence.

These contractions are less common in written English. When such contractions do occur in written English, they are generally used in dialogues.

What is the past perfect and when do we use it?

6.5.2 Past Perfect

The past perfect consists of the past form of the auxiliary *had* (past form of the verb *have*) and the past participle of the main verb. The past perfect tense indicates an event or action completed prior to another point of time in the past. Since *had* is an auxiliary verb, it follows our first auxiliary rule in forming negative statements and questions.

Sentence Types: Past Perfect				
auxiliary	subject	auxiliary (+not)	past participle	sentence type
	Lily	had	listened.	affirmative
	Lily	had not	listened.	negative
	Lily		listened.	question
Had	Lily		listened?	

6.5.2.1 Past Perfect Versus Simple Past

The past perfect is generally used in conjunction with a past tense verb phrase:

We carefully *walked* through the dirt that *had accumulated* on the floors.
It *had stopped* raining, so we *didn't take* our umbrellas.

In these two sentences, the past perfect occurs together with the simple past in order to clarify which action happened first. Both actions took place in the past, but one occurred before the other, regardless of the order of the clauses. In the first sentence, *we walked* occurred after *the dirt that had accumulated*, even though it is earlier in the sentence. In the second sentence, *we didn't take our umbrellas*, took

place after *It had stopped raining*. Despite the fact that the clause order differs, the sequence of events is still clear because the past perfect (*had accumulated*, *had stopped*) indicates which action took place first, while the simple past (*walked*, *didn't take*) indicates the later action.

Do speakers always use the past perfect to indicate the earlier action or event?

When time sequence is not important, speakers may substitute simple past for past perfect:

Cindy *called* when I left.

Often when there is a time indicator, speakers do not use the past perfect.

Scott *e-mailed* me **before** I left.

The word *before* indicates which action was the first past action, and the use of the past perfect is not required to establish the sequence of events. We see this also occurring with the use of *after*.

Some native speakers rarely use the past perfect, especially in casual spoken and written English and use the past tense only, relying on the surrounding context to make the meaning clear.

Discovery Activity 11 asks you to identify the past perfect verb phrases. As you do this activity, think about the time reference of the different verb phrases.

Discovery Activity 11: Identifying the Past Perfect

Look at the excerpts and underline the past perfect verb phrases.

A.

Forty-eight thousand dollars was still a lot of money. More than he'd ever had in his life. And since he had never intended to split it with Earl, it was all his. But his bad luck hadn't stopped there. Earlier today, he had learned through Rose's cousin in Toledo that Arturo Garcia had showed up at her house, put a knife to her throat and demanded to know where Ian was. Marie, who was afraid of her own shadow, had claimed to have had no choice but to tell him the truth. [Heggan, C. (2003). *Deadly intent* (p. 95). Ontario, Canada: Mira.]

B.

Her rounds finished, Abbie returned to the kitchen, feeling much more relaxed than she had been twenty minutes earlier. Agonizing over a man who had apparently vanished from sight was stupid and nerve-racking. Whoever had attacked her was gone, and so was Ian. [Heggan, C. (2003). *Deadly intent* (p. 164). Ontario, Canada: Mira.]

Are there any other perfect tenses?

There are several more perfect tenses that we will now look at. These occur less frequently than the other verb tenses, particularly the last three in this section.

6.5.3 Future Perfect

The future perfect consists of two auxiliaries, *will* and *have*, plus the past participle of the main verb. Based on our first auxiliary rule, we know that questions are formed by inverting the first auxiliary, *will*, and the subject. The negative is formed by placing *not* after *will*.

Future Perfect					
auxiliary	subject	auxiliary (+not)	auxiliary	past participle	sentence type
	The dance	will	have	ended.	affirmative
	The dance	will not	have	ended.	negative
Will	the dance		have	ended?	question

The future perfect is used to refer to events or actions in the future that will take place before another future point in time. *By* or *before* phrases are often found with the future perfect. The future perfect is not a very commonly used tense, but ESL/EFL learners still need to become familiar with this structure. Discovery Activity 12 asks you to find the future perfect verb phrases and discuss it in conjunction with the other verb tenses in the excerpt.

Discovery Activity 12: Identifying the Future Perfect

Look at the excerpt.

1. Underline the future perfect verb phrase.
2. Discuss how the other verb tenses in the excerpt function together to describe the events or actions.

On the way down over coffee and Krispy Kremes, Parks went over the attack plan: “We’re going to send one of the trucks down to the house after we disguise it as a county survey vehicle ... Some of our men will be inside the truck. The others will have surrounded the place and set up a perimeter ... with any luck no shots are fired, and we all go home happy and alive.” [Baldicci, D. (2004). *Split second* (p. 326). NY: Warner.]

6.5.4 *Present Perfect Progressive, Past Perfect Progressive, and Future Perfect Progressive*

We will discuss these three verb forms together because they occur relatively infrequently. All three tenses form questions and negatives according to the first auxiliary rule. Recall also from our earlier discussion of the present progressive that certain verbs are generally not used in the progressive sense. Since they are less common verb forms and ESL/EFL learners will have less exposure to them, they may have difficulty remembering and recognizing their uses.

6.5.4.1 **Present Perfect Progressive**

The present perfect progressive consists of **three** parts: *have + been +* present participle of the main verb. It is used to:

- stress the ongoing nature or duration of an event or action that is indefinite with no specific beginning or end.
- indicate an event or action that began in the past and continues into the present and possibly the future.

Our earlier discussion of stable and variable time in conjunction with the present perfect also applies to the present perfect progressive.

Often the present perfect and present perfect progressive are interchangeable. When speakers wish to emphasize that an event or action is repeated or ongoing, they will use the present perfect progressive. The following sentences do not significantly differ in meaning:

We have been living here for 15 years.

We have lived here for 15 years.

The first sentence, however, emphasizes the length of the event more than does the second sentence.

6.5.4.2 **Past Perfect Progressive**

The past perfect progressive consists of **three** parts: *had + been +* present participle of the main verb. Like the present perfect progressive, it is used to stress the ongoing nature or duration of an event or action and often co-occurs with the simple past.

I had been living in the house for many years when I *decided* to move to something smaller.

6.5.4.3 Future Perfect Progressive

The future perfect progressive consists of **four** parts: *will + have + been +* present participle of the main verb. Like the present perfect progressive and the past perfect progressive, the future perfect progressive is used to stress the ongoing nature or duration of an event or action. The future perfect progressive is often used with expressions that begin with *for*.

By the time Kirsten finishes her dissertation, she *will have been working* on it **for seven years**.

The following Discovery Activity provides practice in recognizing different perfect progressive tenses. If you feel confident in your ability to recognize these tenses, you may wish to do only some, not all, of the excerpts.

Discovery Activity 13: Identifying the Present Perfect and Past Perfect Progressive

Look at the excerpts.

1. Underline the present perfect progressive and past perfect progressive verb phrases.
2. Label each verb tense.

A.

When Skelton had had a good sleep, a bath, and a read, he went out on to the veranda. Mrs. Grange came up to him. It looked as though she had been waiting. [Maugham, W. S. (1977). *Flotsam and jetsam*. In *W.S. Maugham: Sixty-five short stories* (p. 308). New York: Heinemann.]

B.

"I could see Ritter like I said, and there was the man behind him, real close." Baldwin stared hard at her.

"That's right. You say that like you know the man."

"Never met him. But I've been doing a lot of research."

[Baldicci, D. (2004). *Split second* (p. 80). New York: Warner.]

C.

The paper said that Lord Mountdrago had been waiting in a Tube station, standing on the edge of the platform, and as the train came in was seen to fall on the rail The paper went on to say that Lord Mountdrago had been suffering for some weeks from the effects of overwork, but had felt it impossible to absent himself while the foreign situation demanded his unremitting attention. [Maugham, W. S. (1977). *Lord Mountdrago*. In *W.S. Maugham: Sixty-five short stories* (p. 359) New York: Heinemann.]

D.

“When I found out it was once owned by the United States Army, I started wondering why Scott might want to own a spread like that. He’d been living in Montana for a while, real militia person, I guess, so why the move? Well, I’ve been pouring over maps, blueprints and diagrams, and I found out the damn property has an underground bunker built into a hillside.” [Baldicci, D. (2004). *Split second* (pp. 322–323). New York: Warner.]

Can you summarize what ESL/EFL learners find difficult about the verb tenses in English?

• *Learner difficulties*

The difficulties ESL/EFL learners with English verb tenses have fall into two types: structural problems and semantic problems.	
Structural Problems	Semantic Problems
Remembering to use the correct inflections. English only has a few inflections, but learners often forget to use them, for example: *The children color a picture yesterday. *She like to read many book to her son.	Choosing the correct verb tense. Explanations of and guidelines for use are not exact and do not reveal the nuances of meaning. There are often subtle differences when choosing between related verb tenses, for example, <i>will</i> versus <i>be going to</i>; <i>simple past</i> versus <i>present perfect</i>.
Inserting the <i>do</i> auxiliary when necessary and remembering the appropriate inflections, for example, *He no go home. *Do he went home?	
Remembering all the elements of composite verbs: the present progressive has 2 elements; the present perfect progressive has 3 elements; the future perfect progressive 4. *We going to the movies. *We have going to the movies every week.	
You will notice that the list is shorter under “semantic problems,” but keep in mind that choosing the correct verb tense is as important as knowing how to form a correct verb phrase.	

6.6 Summary

Time and Tense

- English has two tenses, *present* and *past*.
- Other time references in English consist of *time* (indicated by the tense of the auxiliary verb *be* or *have*) + *aspect* (indicated by the main verb in either progressive participle or past participle form).

Time		Subject	Verb
present	simple verb except –s in 3rd person singular	I, You, We, They He, She, It	walk. walks.
	negative with <i>do</i> auxiliary	I, You, We, They He, She, It	do not (don't) walk. does not (doesn't) walk.
	question with <i>do</i> auxiliary	Do I, you, we, they Does she, she, it	walk?
past	–ed attached to verb	I, You, We, They, He, She, It	walked.
	negative with <i>do</i> auxiliary	I, You, We, They, He, She, It	did not (didn't) walk.
	question with <i>do</i> auxiliary	Did I, you, we, they, he, she, it	walk?

English has no real future tense but makes use of other constructions to refer to future time:

- *will* + simple verb
- *be going to*

Simple Verb Tense Formation: Past and Present

Compound Tense Formation: Progressive and Perfect (Affirmative Statements)

ASPECT 	Progressive	Perfect	Perfect Progressive
	<i>Be</i> auxiliary + present participle	<i>Have</i> auxiliary + past participle	<i>Have</i> auxiliary + been + present participle
TIME 			
present	am/is/are + Verb + <i>-ing</i> I am walking. We, They, You are walking. He, She, It is walking.	have/has + Verb + <i>-ed</i> (regular verbs) I, We, They, You have walked. He, She, It has walked.	have/has + been + Verb + <i>-ing</i> I, We, They, You have been walking. He, She, It has been walking.
past	was/were + Verb + <i>-ing</i> I, He, She, It was walking. We, They, You are walking. He, She, It is walking.	had + Verb + <i>-ed</i> I, We, They, You, He, She, It had walked.	had + been + Verb + <i>-ing</i> I, We, They, You, He, She, It had been walking.
will (future) <i>Will</i> is a special type of auxiliary verb, called a modal (see Chap. 7). To refer to the future, it is fol- lowed by the simple verb: I, We, They, You, He, She, It will walk.	will + be + Verb + <i>-ing</i> I We, They, You, He, She, It will be walking.	will + have + Verb + <i>-ed</i> I, We, They, You, He, She, It will have walked.	will + have + been + Verb <i>-ing</i> I, We, They, You, He, She, It will have been walking.

All Verb Tenses: Negative Statements and Questions First Auxiliary Rule

Negative Statements	
• If there is one or more auxiliary verb (a form of <i>be</i> or <i>have</i>), place <i>not</i> after the first auxiliary verb.	
Casey <i>is</i> not walking.	1 auxiliary
Casey <i>has</i> not <i>been</i> walking.	2 auxiliaries
Casey <i>will</i> not <i>have been</i> walking.	3 auxiliaries
• In simple present and simple past, insert the <i>do</i> auxiliary + <i>not</i> .	
Casey <i>does not</i> like tea.	simple present
Laura <i>didn't</i> come early.	simple past
Questions	
• If there is more than one auxiliary verb, invert the first auxiliary verb and the subject.	
<i>Is</i> Casey walking?	1 auxiliary
<i>Has</i> Casey <i>been</i> walking?	2 auxiliaries
<i>Will</i> Casey <i>have been</i> walking?	3 auxiliaries
• In simple present and simple past, insert the <i>do</i> auxiliary before the subject and keep the main verb in its simple or base form.	
<i>Does</i> Casey like coffee?	simple present
<i>Did</i> Lauren come late?	simple past

6.7 Practice Activities

Activity 1: The Parts of the English Verb

A. Complete the table below to help you clarify your understanding of English verb forms. The first one has been done for you as an example.

base verb	present 3rd person singular	past	present participle	past participle
walks	walks	walked	walking	walked
clean		cleaned		
make			making	
eat				eaten
ride		rode		
study				
sing	sings			sung
write			writing	
speak			speaking	
teach	teaches			
learn		learned		
cut			cutting	
bring	brings			
love				loved
buy			buying	
buzz	buzzes			
feel				felt

B. Now make your own table for all the forms of the verb *be*. You should have a total of seven different forms, more forms than any other English verb.

Activity 2: Verb Tense Practice

A. Regular Verb

Take the phrase *Chloe paint* and create a sentence for each of the following tenses. You may need to add words (e.g., a time expression or another clause) to make a good sentence. The first sentence is done for you as an example.

1. present Chloe paints every week.
2. past
3. future
4. present progressive
5. past progressive
6. future progressive
7. present perfect
8. past perfect
9. future perfect
10. present perfect progressive
11. past perfect progressive
12. future perfect progressive

B. Irregular Verb

Take the phrase *Chloe drives a car* and create a sentence for each of the following verb tenses. You may need to add words (e.g., a time expression or another clause) to make a good sentence.

1. present
2. past
3. future
4. present progressive
5. past progressive
6. future progressive
7. present perfect
8. past perfect
9. future perfect
10. present perfect progressive
11. past perfect progressive
12. future perfect progressive

Activity 3: Distinguishing Between Participial Adjectives and the Present Participle in Verb Phrases

1. Mark all the participial adjectives.
 - Label them PartAdj.
2. Underline the present and past progressive verb phrases.
 - Label the present participle PresPart.

Example:

PartAdj	PresPart	
The <u>crying</u> baby	<u>was lying</u>	in its crib.

[W]hen ABC newsman Sam Donaldson stands up on the White House lawn ... on display is the fading glory of the well-coiffed balding man. “Twenty years ago, of the guys who were balding, I’d say 50% combed over,” says Sal Cicala ... “My advice,” Mr. Henson says, “to guys like me who are losing a little: Wash it, blow it dry. Use a fine-tooth comb and comb it and wrap it around ... ” Though on the trailing end of fashion, the comb-over remains unbeatable in its versatility ... “I’m covering nine miles of scalp with six miles of hair,” boasts late-night television host Tom Snyder... [Bailey, J. (2004). Domes of resistance. In K.Wells (Ed.), *Floating off the page: The best stories from the Wall Street Journal’s “Middle Column”* (pp. 61–63). New York: Simon & Schuster.]

Activity 4: Identifying Auxiliary Verbs

1. Find the verbs in the following excerpt and underline them. Be sure to underline the entire verb. (You can ignore the verb *said*, which appears repeatedly.)
2. Label the *auxiliary* verbs Aux.
3. Label the *main* verbs V.
4. Identify the tense of the verb.

Example:

Jane was drinking tea because she didn’t want coffee. She had been drinking water earlier.

was (Aux V) drinking (V)	past progressive
didn’t (Aux + not) want (V)	past, negative
had been(2 Aux) drinking (V)	past perfect progressive

Snooping had rewarded him well .. He wasn’t snooping, however, when he came into the Brown Detective Agency. He was drooping. “I nearly had it all,” he moaned and sagged against the wall ...

He whipped out a piece of cloth. The colors had run together, making one large red smear ...

"I'll bet Pete first made a copy of the map ... " said Winslow angrily. "After he brought me home, he probably returned to the islands."

"He won't find anything there but a sunburn," said Encyclopedia. He pointed to a tiny black smudge on the back of the map .. "It was writing," replied Encyclopedia. "It said 'New York World's Fair ..'"

[Winslow's] face lit up. "Peter's off digging for treasure—he thinks ...!"

"We don't know that Pete ruined your map on purpose," Encyclopedia said.

"I'll hire you," said Winslow .. Encyclopedia agreed, and two hours later the boys were heading toward the islands in a skiff ..

"Pete will be digging by a group of three coconut trees," said Winslow ... [Sobol, D. (1970). *Encyclopedia Brown saves the day* (pp. 57–60). New York: Bantam.]

Activity 5: Analyzing Verb Tenses

1. Identify the tense of each bolded verb.
2. Discuss why each tense is used.

When [Eric] **woke up**, light **was streaking** across his face [The planet's] sun **crossed** over the mouth of the pit. "Holy crow!" he cried. "I've **been** here all night. Oh, man!" ... Eric **felt** a sharp pain in his stomach ... It **had been** a day since he'd **eaten**. His stomach **was** empty ... He **felt** something round and hard under his foot. It **was** one of those smelly fruits he'd **found** in the garden "No way!" he cried. "I'm **not going to** eat it .." But he couldn't stop himself. The fruit **tasted** sweet! It **was** delicious. "This **is** the most delicious food I've **ever eaten**!" he cried. "I've **never tasted** anything so—"

"Please keep it down," whispered a voice ...

"You're **talking** too much," said another voice.

"How can I understand you?" Eric asked.

"The tangfruit... Its taste **is** magic ..." "You **are now speaking** our language. The effect **will wear off**, of course ..." [Abbot, T. (2001). *The secrets of Droon: The hawk bandits of Tarkoom* (p. 27). New York: Scholastic.]

Activity 6: Choosing Verb Tenses

In the following excerpt some of the verbs are given only in their base form.

1. Change the base verb into the tense that you feel fits best here.
2. Compare your answers with your classmates.
 - Explain why you chose the tenses you did (e.g., what sentence clues did you use to help you make your choice)?

When Mendanbar (1. **get back**) to the castle, the first person he (2. **see**) was Willin, standing in the doorway looking relieved. By the time Mendanbar (3. **get**) within earshot, however, the elf's expression (4. **change**) to a ferocious scowl.

"I (5. **be**) happy to see that Your Majesty (6. **return**) safely," Willin said stiffly. "I (7. **be**) about to send a party to search for you .."

“What’s happened?”

“Your Majesty (8. **have**) an unexpected visitor.” He paused. “At least, I (9. **presume**) he (10. **be**) unexpected ..”

“Who is it?” Mendanbar asked. “Not another complaint from the Darkmorning Elves, I (11. **hope**)? If it (12. **be**), you can tell them I (13. **see, not**) them. I (14. **have**) enough of their whining and I’ve got more important things to attend to right now.”

“No,” Willin said. “It (15. **be**) Zemanar, the Head Wizard of the Society of Wizards.”

“Oh, lord,” Mendanbar said. He (16. **meet**) the Head Wizard once before, at his coronation three years earlier, and he (17. **not, like**) the man much then.. “How long (18. **he, wait**)? What (19. **he, want**)?”

“He only has only been here for a few minutes,” Willin reassured him.. “As I (20. **recall**), he (21. **have got**) an exaggerated idea of his own importance...”

Oh (22. **not, worry**), I (23. **not, say**) anything improper when I (24. **talk**) to him. Where (25. **he, be**)? [Wrede, P. (1991). *Searching for dragons: The enchanted forest chronicles book II* (pp. 42–44). New York: Scholastic.]

Activity 7: Finding and Analyzing Verb Tenses

1. Look at the following excerpts.
2. Underline the verbs and identify their tense.

A.

As one of the brightest objects in the night sky, the planet Jupiter has been a source of fascination since the dawn of astronomy. Now a cuneiform tablet dating to between 350 and 50 B.C. shows that Babylonians not only tracked Jupiter, they were taking the first steps from geometry toward calculus to figure out the distance it moved across the sky. [Emspak, J. (2016, January). Babylonians were using geometry centuries earlier than thought. *Smithsonian*. Retrieved from <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/ancient-babylonians-were-using-geometry-centuries-earlier-thought-180957965/>]

B.

“I was working a case in the neighborhood and I decided to pop by for a quick hello ...”
 “I’ll pick you up tomorrow at seven ... and we’ll drive out to my folks together. “That doesn’t give me much time.” [Levine, L. (2015). *Death by tiara*. Kindle iPad Version. Retrieved from Amazon.com]

C.

“Taylor is going to compete in the local division of the Miss Teen Queen America pageant this weekend, and I need you to write her some snappy lyrics...”

“That doesn’t give me much time.” [Levine, L. (2015). *Death by tiara*. Kindle iPad Version. Retrieved from Amazon.com]

D.

A knot tightened in Alyssa’s stomach. She’d grown up seeing how high her mother had set the bar in journalistic endeavors. [Carroll, R. 2008). *Bayou corruption*. Kindle iPad Version. Retrieved from Amazon.com]

Activity 8: Error Analysis

The following excerpts were written by ESL and EFL learners. There are errors in verb forms and tense.

1. Underline each verb form and tense error you find. **Ignore all other errors.**
2. Correct the error focusing *only* on verb tense errors.
 - Explain the problem. For example, the writer should have used tense X and not tense Y because...

A.

Rabbit's name is Len. Her nose and mouth is red. Her eyes are orange. She like carrots. She is not like onions.

B.

My sister mess up my room. My sister write on my work. She rip my folder.

C.

I had felt the freedom from the army three months ago before my mind began to bothers me about no work. I made my appointment with the boss of the jewelry shop and on an early Monday morning I go to meet my future place. There were ten workers and the boss who were wore warm smiles.

D.

Dear Mayor,

I just heard you thinking about different ways to solve the traffic problem. People drive cars and they got late to work because they have only one road. For example, in front of my building, people working construction and people has to go around to come to the highway. If there is more roads, then people comes different ways and don't got late to work. If our city has many different ways to go, then people won't accidents. Therefore I think improving the streets and highways will to solve the traffic problem that we have.

E.

Today, we are living in Global Village. The Global Village means the world become smaller, like a small town. I think internet, TV, movies is making world be a Global Village. By using the internet, we can chat with many different people and I am downloading whatever I want and I am send message using e-mail. By watching TV, we will hear about world news so we know what happen in this world now. We can learn about other cultures. In my case, I learn about many cultures through TV programs.

F.

I am wishing you Happy Holidays. When Christmas is coming, I am becoming a child again. I am wanting to believe in Santa Claus because it makes the magic of Christmas.

Activity 9: Reviewing Tense and Aspect—Questions for Discussion

This is a long activity to review verb tenses. A good way to do this activity is to have the class divide into groups, with different groups preparing different questions to share with the rest of the class.

1. When do we use present tense in English?
 - How are simple statements formed?
 - How are questions formed?
 - How is the negative formed?
 - Are the rules governing statement, question, and negative formation prescriptive grammar rules or fundamental rules of English? Explain your choice.
2. What is the present progressive?
 - How does this contrast with simple present, that is, what is the general rule governing the use of present progressive?
 - What exceptions are there? Are these exceptions rule-governed? Explain your reasoning.
 - How are questions formed?
 - How is the negative formed?
 - Are there any verbs not generally used in the progressive? If so, which ones?
3. When do we use simple past?
 - How are simple statements formed?
 - How are questions formed?
 - How is the negative formed?
 - Are the rules governing statement, question, and negative formation prescriptive grammar rules or fundamental rules of English? Explain your choice.
4. What is the present perfect?
 - What do we mean when we say *stable* and *variable* time?
 - How does the present perfect contrast with simple present, present progressive, and simple past?
 - How are simple statements formed?
 - How are questions formed?
 - How is the negative formed?
5. Why do we say that English does not have a future tense?
 - Explain how English expresses future time and the different meanings associated with the different possibilities for expressing future time.

6.8 Answer Key

Discussion: Discovery Activity 1

Column A

- The sentences refer to facts, truths, or characteristics.
- They are in present tense.

Column B

- The sentences refer to actions that are occurring now or at the moment of speaking.
- They are in the present progressive. This verb tense is composed of the auxiliary verb *be* + present participle.
- The auxiliary *be* is inflected for tense and works together with the present participle to form indicate time (present) and aspect (ongoing).
- The last sentence **She is being sick* is not a grammatical English sentence here because *be* used to describe a characteristic or fact cannot used in this form.⁴

Discussion: Discovery Activity 2

Column C

- The sentences are in the simple past tense. They refer to single, completed actions.

Column D

- The sentences are in the past progressive. They refer to past ongoing actions.
- This verb tense is composed of the auxiliary verb *be* + the present participle. The participle form in Column D is identical to the one used in the sentences in Column B, Discovery Activity 1, but the time reference has changed because the auxiliary *be* is now inflected for past tense.
- The meaning, use, and function of the past progressive differ from the present progressive, which we discuss in greater detail later in this chapter.

Discussion: Discovery Activity 3

Column E

- The sentences are the same sentences as those in Column C, Discovery Activity 2. They are in the simple past.

⁴There is an idiomatic use of *be* + *being* + *sick*, which means vomiting, but this is different from the general meaning where *be* + *sick* refers to a person's health.

Column F

- These sentences are in the present perfect. This verb tense is composed of the auxiliary *have* or *has* + the past participle.
- The auxiliary works together with the past participle to form verb phrases that indicate time (past) and aspect (completion), as we will see later in this chapter.

Discussion: Discovery Activity 4

A brief discussion is provided to help you.

Excerpt A

What are <u>they doing</u> ?	<i>wh</i> -question asking for object of sentence; auxiliary <i>be</i> inverts with subject pronoun <i>they</i> and is followed by present participle <i>doing</i>
They're <u>putting down</u>	<i>put down</i> = phrasal verb

Excerpt B

everybody's <u>hanging around</u>	contraction of <i>everybody is hanging around</i> , phrasal verb
nobody's <u>doing</u>	contraction of form <i>nobody is doing</i>

Excerpt C

I'm <u>taking... off</u>	contraction of <i>am taking off</i> , phrasal verb
who's <u>dying</u>	contraction of <i>is dying</i>
<u>are dying</u>	

Discussion: Discovery Activity 5

Excerpt A

The simple present tense is being used with *now* even though the speaker is not referring to a specific event or action going on at the moment. He is referring to fact or truth.

Excerpt B

Simple present is used to narrate events in the story. It is a rhetorical device that gives readers a sense of participating in or being a part of a story as it takes place. The tone of the narration would change significantly if the author used present progressive in place of simple present.

Discussion: Discovery Activity 6*Sentences 1a and 1b*

smell and *taste* used intransitively, followed by adjectives.

Both *smell* and *taste* refer to characteristics of a subject noun phrase, *a rose* and *the noodles* respectively.

Sentences 2a and 2b

smell and *taste* used transitively to refer to actions (*are smelling, is tasting*).

Sentence 1c

refers to fact

Sentence 2c

a more idiomatic use of verb *see*, referring to impending action (e.g., upcoming visit)⁵

Sentence 1d

asking about fact or opinion

Sentence 2d

referring to something occurring now

Sentence 1e

describing something about Joe's personality

Sentence 2e

referring to Joe's behavior at the moment

Sentence 1f

has refers to possession; it is a fact

Sentence 2f

idiomatic use of *have*, meaning to eat

⁵There is another idiomatic use of *see* in present progressive: *Miles is seeing Kim*. In this case, *is seeing* refers to dating.

Discussion: Discovery Activity 7**Excerpt A**

tugged	ends in a <i>g</i> sound; pronounced with the <i>d</i> sound
was	irregular past tense form of <i>be</i> , pronounced with a <i>z</i> sound
glided	ends with a <i>d</i> sound; pronounced <i>id</i>
relaxed	ends with an <i>s</i> sound; pronounced with the <i>t</i> sound
sighed	ends with a vowel sound; pronounced with the <i>d</i> sound

Excerpt B

ran	irregular past tense form of <i>run</i>
leaped	ends in a <i>p</i> sound; pronounced with the <i>t</i> sound
struck	irregular past tense form of <i>strike</i>
skidded	ends in a <i>d</i> sound; pronounced <i>id</i>
righted	ends in the <i>t</i> sound; pronounced <i>id</i>
looked back	ends in a <i>k</i> sound; pronounced with the <i>t</i> sound
grinned	ends in an <i>n</i> sound; pronounced with the <i>d</i> sound
got	irregular past tense form of <i>get</i>
walked	ends in a <i>k</i> sound, pronounced with the <i>t</i> sound
faced	ends in an <i>s</i> sound, pronounced with the <i>t</i> sound
rapped	ends in a <i>p</i> sound; pronounced with the <i>t</i> sound

Excerpt C

arrived	ends in an <i>v</i> sound, pronounced with the <i>d</i> sound
noticed	ends in an <i>s</i> sound, pronounced with the <i>t</i> sound
was	irregular past tense form of <i>be</i>
was	irregular past tense form of <i>be</i>
looked	ends in a <i>k</i> sound, pronounced with the <i>t</i> sound
named	ends in an <i>m</i> sound, pronounced with the <i>d</i> sound
made	irregular past tense form of <i>make</i>
dressed	ends in an <i>s</i> sound, pronounced with the <i>t</i> sound
went	irregular past tense form of <i>go</i>
weighed	ends with a vowel sound, pronounced with the <i>d</i> sound

Discussion: Discovery Activity 8

The past progressive forms stress the ongoing nature of the events. The simple past verbs indicate single past actions

Excerpt A

were playing, were losing	past progressive
scored, kicked	simple past

Excerpt B

was sitting, was leaning, was screaming, was coming down	past progressive
saw, knew, looked, blinked, didn't want, had to, reached, ran	simple past

Discussion: Discovery Activity 9*Excerpt A*

Use of *will* versus *be going to* stresses promise or guarantee that events described will happen; substitution of *be going to* instead of *will* conveys idea of fact rather than promise

Excerpt B

Substitution of *be going to* for *will* in first four sentences possible with no change in meaning; all sentences refer to future facts

In last sentence, *will* conveys sense of promise or threat; *be going to* not appropriate

Excerpt C

Substitution of *will* not appropriate; *be going to* conveying idea of prior plan about future events that speaker (Marvin) is recounting

Excerpt D

Substitution of *will* for *be going to* not appropriate; speaker referring to a very immediate and almost certain future event.

Discussion: Discovery Activity 10

A brief discussion for each answer is provided to help you.

Excerpt A

- *haven't drawn* and *haven't pulled*
- Both are negative verb phrases where *not* is contracted with the auxiliary *have*.
- The past participle *drawn* is the irregular past participle of the verb *draw*; the past participle *pulled* is the regular past participle of *pull*.

Excerpt B

- The first present perfect verb phrase is *has enabled*. The subject of *has enabled* is “The evidence provided by radioactive dating.”
- The next examples are *have determined* and *have divided*. In each sentence the subject of the verb phrase is “scientists.”
- In the final sentence *do not have* is not the present perfect, but the negative present tense of the verb *have* in the sense of “possession.”

Excerpt C

- The first sentence includes the present perfect *have documented*.
- The second part of the sentence with *have devastating* may be confusing. This is the use of the main verb *have* in the sense of “cause.” *Devastating* is functioning as a participial adjective describing *effects* (see Chap. 4).
- In the last sentence, we see the present perfect *have evolved*.

Discussion: Discovery Activity 11*Excerpt A*

- *he'd ever had* (contraction, with adverb *ever*)
- *had never intended* (with adverb *never*)
- *hadn't stopped* (negative contraction)
- *had learned* and *had showed up*. Note that *show up* is a phrasal verb. (See Chap. 5.)
- *had claimed*
- Note: *to have had* is a perfect infinitive. (See Chap. 12.)

Excerpt B

- *had been*
- *had apparently vanished* (with adverb *apparently*)
- *had attacked*

Discussion: Discovery Activity 12

The excerpt begins with the simple past (*went over*) to introduce the events described by a character named Parks.

- *went over* is a phrasal verb (see Chap. 5).
- Parks begin his narration with the *be* + *going to* future (*we're going to send*).
- The next sentence has the future, *will be*.

- We see the future perfect in the next sentence, *will have surrounded*. This refers to an action occurring after another action in the future (*will be inside*).
- The rest of the excerpt is present tense narrative.

Discussion: Discovery Activity 13*Excerpt A*

- past perfect progressive: *had been waiting*
- No substitution of another verb tense possible.

Excerpt B

- present perfect progressive: *I've been doing*.
- In this context it would be possible to substitute the simple past, *I did*, without a significant change in meaning.

Excerpt C

- two past perfect progressive forms, *had been waiting* and *had been suffering*.
- It would be possible to substitute the past perfect (*had waited*, *had suffered*), but the length or duration of the action would no longer be emphasized.

Excerpt D

- past perfect progressive: *He'd been living*
- present perfect progressive: *I've been pouring*.
- In either case, the non-progressive form could be substituted (*He'd lived*, *he poured*).