

Guía – Perfect Tenses

The Present Perfect Simple Tense

How to form the present perfect

To make the positive present perfect tense, use:

- 'have' / 'has' + the **past participle**

.We use this tense for unfinished and finished actions.

Unfinished Actions

1: We use this tense when we want to talk about unfinished actions or states or habits that started in the past and continue to the present. Usually we use it to say 'how long' and we need 'since' or 'for'. We often use stative verbs.

- I've known Karen since 1994.
- She's lived in London for three years.
- I've worked here for six months.

'Since' and 'For'

We use 'since' with a fixed time in the past (2004, April 23rd, last year). The fixed time can be another action, which is in the past simple (since I was at school, since I arrived).

- I've known Sam since 1992.
- I've liked chocolate since I was a child.
- She's been here since 2pm.

We use 'for' with a period of time (2 hours, three years, six months).

- I've known Julie for ten years.
- I've been hungry for hours.
- She's had a cold for a week.

Finished Actions

2: Life experience. These are actions or events that happened sometime during a person's life. We don't say when the experience happened, and the person needs to be alive now. We often use the words 'ever' and 'never' here.

- I have been to Tokyo.
- They have visited Paris three times.
- We have never seen that film.

3: With an unfinished time word (this month, this week, today). The period of time is still continuing.

- I haven't seen her this month.
- She's drunk three cups of coffee today.
- I've already moved house twice this year!

We CAN'T use the present perfect with a finished time word.

- NOT: ~~I've seen him yesterday.~~

4: A finished action with a result in the present (focus on result). We often use the present perfect to talk about something that happened in the recent past, but that is still true or important now. Sometimes we can use the past simple here, especially in US English.

- I've lost my keys (so I can't get into my house).
- She's hurt her leg (so she can't play tennis today)
- They've missed the bus (so they will be late).

5: We can also use the present perfect to talk about something that happened recently, even if there isn't a clear result in the present. This is common when we want to introduce news and we often use the words 'just / yet / already / recently'. However, the past simple is also correct in these cases, especially in US English.

- The Queen has given a speech.
- I've just seen Lucy.
- The Mayor has announced a new plan for the railways.

Been and Gone

In this tense, we use both 'been' and 'gone' as the past participle of 'go', but in slightly different circumstances. We use 'been' (often when we talk about life experience) to mean that the person we're talking about visited the place and came back.

- I've been to Paris (in my life, but now I'm in London, where I live).
- She has been to school today (but now she's back at home).
- They have never been to California.

We use 'gone' (often when we are talking about an action with a result in the present) to mean that the person went to the place and is at the place now.

- Where's John? He's gone to the shops (he's at the shops now).
- Julie has gone to Mexico (now she's in Mexico).
- They've gone to Japan for three weeks (now they're in Japan).

Present Perfect Continuous

Unfinished actions

1: To say how long for unfinished actions which started in the past and continue to the present. We often use this with 'for' and 'since' (see the **the present perfect simple page** for more about 'for' and 'since').

- I've been living in London for two years.
- She's been working here since 2004.
- We've been waiting for the bus for hours.

This use is very similar to how we use the present perfect simple, and often it's possible to use either tense. Of course, with stative verbs, we can't use the present perfect continuous.

- I've been here for hours.
- NOT: ~~I've been being here for hours.~~

2: For temporary habits or situations. The action started in the past and continues to the present in the same way as with use number 1, but we don't answer the questions about 'how long' so clearly. Instead, we use a word like 'recently'.

- I've been going to the gym a lot recently.
- They've been living with his mother while they look for a house.
- I've been reading a lot recently.

This is very similar to the use of the present continuous for temporary habits and often either tense is possible.

Finished actions

3: Actions which have recently stopped (though the whole action can be unfinished) and have a result, which we can often see, hear, or feel, in the present. We don't use a time word here.

- I'm so tired, I've been studying.
- I've been running, so I'm really hot.
- It's been raining so the pavement is wet.

The present perfect simple has a very similar use, which focuses on the result of the action, whereas the present perfect continuous focuses on the action itself.

What's the difference?

Present Perfect Simple and Present Perfect Continuous

We use both of these tenses for finished and unfinished actions.

The present perfect simple can be used (often with 'since' and 'for') to talk about unfinished actions that started in the past and are still true in the present. It's often used with stative verbs:

- I've known John for three years.

The present perfect continuous can also be used (often with 'since' and 'for') to talk about unfinished actions that started in the past and are still true in the present. (Of course, we don't use the present perfect continuous with stative verbs):

- She's been living here for three years.

Sometimes there's really no difference in meaning between the two tenses. This is especially the case with verbs such as 'live', 'work' and 'study':

- They've lived in London since 2004.
- They've been living in London since 2004.
- I've studied French for ten years.
- I've been studying French for ten years.
- He's worked at the company since 2009.
- He's been working at our company since 2009.

Sometimes, there is a difference in meaning:

1: The present perfect continuous can be used to emphasise the length of time that has passed. The present perfect simple is generally neutral:

- They've been waiting for hours! (This emphasises the length of time).
- They've waited for hours. (This doesn't emphasise the length of time).

2: On the other hand, the present perfect simple is often used when we're talking about how much or how many. This isn't possible with the present perfect continuous:

- She's drunk three cups of coffee this morning.
- She's drunk at least a litre of coffee today.
- (NOT: ~~she's been drinking three cups of coffee this morning~~).

3: The present perfect continuous often focuses on the action itself, while the present perfect simple focuses on the fact that the action is completed:

- I've been reading the book you recommended. (I'm enjoying it, but I'm not finished).
- I've read the book you recommended. (I've finished it, so we can talk about it).

We use 'yet' and 'already' with the present perfect simple:

- Have you read the book yet?
- She's finished her work already.

This difference is often used to talk about different kinds of results in the present. The present perfect simple is used when the action is finished, and the result comes from the action being finished:

- I've eaten dinner, so let's go out.
- She's done all her homework, so she can relax this evening.
- I've made a cake. Would you like some?

The present perfect continuous is used when the result comes from the action itself. It doesn't matter if the whole action is finished or not. The result is often something we can see, hear, smell, or feel:

- I've been eating dinner, so there are plates all over the table.
- She's been doing her homework, so she's tired.
- I've been making a cake, that's why the kitchen is such a mess.

4: Finally, the present perfect continuous can be used to emphasise that something is temporary:

- She's been running a lot recently. (She doesn't usually do this).
- Usually I study at home, but I've been studying in the library for the last week.

The Past Perfect Tense

1: A finished action before a second point in the past.

- When we arrived, the film had started (= first the film started, then we arrived).

We usually use the past perfect to make it clear which action happened first. Maybe we are already talking about something in the past and we want to mention something else that is further back in time.

This is often used to explain or give a reason for something in the past.

- I'd eaten dinner so I wasn't hungry.
- It had snowed in the night, so the bus didn't arrive.

If it's clear which action happened first (if we use the words 'before' or 'after', for example), the past perfect is optional.

- The film started before we arrived / the film had started before we arrived.

2: Something that started in the past and continued up to another action or time in the past. The past perfect tells us 'how long', just like the present perfect, but this time the action continues up to a point in the past rather than the present. Usually we use 'for + time'. We can also use the past perfect continuous here, so we most often use the past perfect simple with **stative verbs**.

- When he graduated, he had been in London for six years. (= He arrived in London six years before he graduated and lived there until he graduated, or even longer.)
- On the 20th of July, I'd worked here for three months.

3: To talk about unreal or imaginary things in the past. In the same way that we use the past simple to talk about unreal or imaginary things in the present, we use the past perfect (one step back in time) to talk about unreal things in the past. This is common in the **third conditional** and after '**wish**'.

- If I had known you were ill, I would have visited you.
- She would have passed the exam if she had studied harder.
- I wish I hadn't gone to bed so late!