Past simple & past continuous

Past simple

Forms

- Most regular verbs add -ed: show → showed; visit → visited; work → worked;
- Verbs ending in -e add -d: hope → hoped; decide → decided
- One and two-syllable verbs ending in one stressed vowel + one consonant double the consonant and add -ed: shop → shopped; regret → regretted
- Verbs ending in consonant + y change y to i and add -ed: hurry → hurried; cry → cried
- Verbs ending in -c have ck in the past: picnic → picnicked; panic → panicked

Pronunciation of -ed

It is pronounced in three different ways according to what sound precedes it:

- /d/ after vowels and voiced consonants (/ð/, /b/, /v/, /z/, /ʒ/, /g/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/): tried /traid/; failed /feild/.
- /t/ after unvoiced consonants (/θ/, /p/, /f/, /s/, /ʃ/, /ʧ/, /k/): stopped /stopt/; passed /pa:st/; work /wɜːkt/
- /id/ after /d/ and /t/: ended /'endid/; started /'sta:tid/

Use and meaning:

The past simple tense can refer to past states, to short, quickly finished past actions and events as well as to longer actions and situations and habitual past activities.
It is often accompanied by past time adverbials such as last, ago, yesterday, the other day, dates, expressions such as when I..., etc.

The list included hundreds of people
The children broke the window pane
When I was a child we always went to the seaside in August
I lived in Boston for five years

Past tense with present or future meaning:

- Conditional sentences: If I had the money I would buy a car; Suppose we spent next weekend in London?
- After it’s time, would rather, wish: I wish I had a better memory; It’s time we went home; I’d rather you came tomorrow
- Expressions conveying a “tentative” attitude, suggesting politeness or respect: Did you wish to see me?; I wondered if you could do this for me; I thought you might need some wine
- Reported speech: ‘What did you say?’ ‘I asked how old you were’
**Past continuous**

The most common use of the *past continuous* is to talk about *what was happening at a particular moment in the past*:

*What were you doing yesterday at this time? I was studying*

The past continuous is used to talk about *two or more past simultaneous actions*:

*While I was studying she was listening to the radio*

The past continuous is often used together with a past simple. The past continuous refers to a longer ‘background’ action or situation while the simple past refers to a shorter action or event that happened in the middle of the longer action or that interrupted it:

*While I was having a shower the telephone rang
I saw her while I was driving to the office*

**Past simple vs past continuous**

The simple past is normally used to talk about repeated or habitual action on the past. Yet the past continuous is used for *temporary past situations or habits*:

*In those days I was getting up very early
This happened when I was living with my uncle*

Unlike the simple past, the past continuous indicates *plans not carried out*. Compare:

*I was coming to see her last night, but then ....
I went to see her last night*

The past simple, not the past continuous, is used for *past consecutive actions*:

*I came back from work, then I had a shower and went out
As soon as she entered the room she saw them*

In *narratives*, the past continuous is often used for descriptions (or to dwell upon a topic) while the past simple for events and actions:

*The bride was wearing a white dress. The bridegroom came in ...*

Once the scene has been set with the progressive aspect it is normal to return to the simple aspect or to alternate the two:

*The snow was thawing fast. Drops of water trickled from the branches...*
Present perfect simple

The Present perfect simple is used:

1) to talk about actions and situations which began in the past and have continued up to the present or just finished. It is often used with expressions of time that refer to a period stretching “up to now” (all my life, so far, recently);

2) to talk about a series of repeated actions which have happened up to the present;

3) to indicate past actions which may not be recent but are part of our experience

Some examples:

I have finished
I’ve lived in England since 1990.
I’ve often spent my holidays in England
I’ve broken my leg
I’ve travelled a lot in America

More generally, the present perfect simple is employed to talk about finished actions and events, which must have some present relevance, some kind of connection with the moment of speaking (a continued truth value, the persistence of results, the present effects of past events etc.). In order to use the present perfect it must not be specified when an event takes place; in fact, the present perfect is used with indefinite time expressions such as never, before, many times etc.

When we think about a specific finished point of time in the past, even if we do not mention it, the past simple must be used:

Have you seen The Matrix?
Did you see ‘The Matrix’? (last night on TV)

Sometimes, reference to the past is implicit from the context:

Dickens wrote many novels

Gone, been, ever, never, yet, already, since, for:

- gone / been: I’ve been to the supermarket and I’ve bought this bottle of wine. ‘Where’s Rachel?’ ‘She’s gone to the supermarket to buy some groceries’. I don’t know how long it will take’.

- ever / never: I have never driven a Ferrari; Have you ever .....? I haven’t ever Did Shakespeare ever....?

- yet / already: I have already eaten; I haven’t eaten yet; Has he gone yet? (I don’t know) // Has he already gone? (I know and I am surprised)

- since / for: I’ve had this car for 10 years now (period of time)
     I’ve had this car since 1995 (‘point of time’)


It’s the first/second/third etc. time + present perfect:

It’s the tenth time I’ve seen this film!

Today, this morning, this week, this year etc. + present perfect or past simple. The present perfect is normally used when we think of the entire period up to the moment of speaking, the simple past if we think of a finished part of that period:

I haven’t seen him today
I didn’t see him today at work (the working day is over)

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The semantic nature of the verb and the attitude of the speaker must be taken into account:

I got up late this morning
He has overslept (he’s still sleeping); Sorry, I overslept (I got up late)
I’ve seen her this morning; I saw her this morning

Remember: the choice between past simple and present perfect depends not on the actual temporal location of the event but on the orientation of the speaker, on whether the focus is on “then” or “now”: He has arrived; He arrived last night

From present perfect to past simple: psychological shift from “some time in the past” to “that particular time”. Therefore, general news is usually given in the present perfect, details in the past simple:

A: I have been to England. B: Really? What did you do there?
A: I’ve bought a new car. B: Where/When/Why did you...?

Present perfect continuous

The present perfect continuous indicates past activities, actions or events which have taken place over a period of time: 1) leading up to the present; 2) ending just before the present; 3) not necessarily lasting up until the present but whose effects are still apparent

He’s been studying all afternoon
A: You’re sweating. B: I’ve been running
Drive slowly. It’s been snowing

The present perfect continuous is also used to express repeated events and actions up to the present:

I’ve been having migraines for the last ten days

While the present perfect simple expresses the idea of completion, the present perfect continuous emphasizes activity:

I’ve read your book (I have finished it);
I’ve been reading your book
The present perfect continuous is used when we focus on *how long* an activity or situation has been going on. The present perfect simple is used when we focus on *result* or *quantity* (*how much / how many*):

- *He’s been drinking for hours*
- *He’s drunk two bottles of whisky*
- *Someone has been drinking my beer* (there’s some left)
- *Someone has drunk my beer* (there’s none left)

The present perfect continuous can be used to indicate “negative” activity. Compare:

- *I haven’t been watching TV, I’ve been studying*
- *I haven’t eaten all day* (not even once)

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**Past perfect simple & continuous**

**Past perfect simple**

The *past perfect* is used in the same way as the present perfect, but the point of orientation is in the past instead of in the present moment of speaking. When we use the past perfect we are already talking about the past and we want to make clear that something had already happened at the time we speak:

- *I realized that I had forgotten my keys*

The past perfect is employed when we want to go back to an earlier time from a point which is already in the past. Yet when we talk about past events in the order in which they happened, it is not generally necessary to use the past perfect. Compare:

- *I felt upset because of what my friend had said, but I tried not to think about it too much*
- *My friend said some horrible things to me. I felt upset, but I tried not to think about it too much*

The past perfect is used with stative verbs to say how long something continues up to a a given past moment:

- *I had been abroad until the day before*
- *They had known each other for ten years*

Time conjunctions – such as *when, after, as soon as* and *once* – can be used to talk about two events that occur one after the other. In this case the past perfect is not usually employed, since we do not go back to an earlier time than the time of speaking; on the contrary, we move forward from one event to the next:

- *As soon as the plane landed, the anti-terrorist squad intervened*
Yet remember that the past simple can often be used instead of the past perfect if the action which happened earlier in time was a short one:

*When I opened the fridge, a bottle of wine fell down*

However, the past perfect can be used when we want to underline that the first action is separate, independent of the second, completed before the second started:

*After I had washed the car, it started to rain*

This use of the past perfect is especially common with *when*, owing to the fact that *when* has various meanings, and therefore it is often necessary to make time relations clear in a sentence:

*When he had finished his homework, he went out for a walk* (the two actions are quite separate)
*When I saw the man lying on the ground I screamed* (the second action was caused by the first)

After *if, if only, wish* and *would rather* the past perfect refers to “unreal situations”, that is to say to past actions or events that did not happen:

*If only you had said this before*
*I’d rather you had told me the truth*
*I wish I had taken care of this a long time ago*
*If I had told her, she would not have understood*

Just as the present perfect is used after expressions such as *it is the first/second/third etc. ... that* and similar structures (such as *it is the only/best/worst*), the past perfect is used after *it was the first/second/third etc. ... that* and similar structures:

*It was the fourth time he had called his mother that night*
*It was the worst play I had ever seen*

**Past perfect continuous**

It is the equivalent of the Present perfect continuous, yet the present perfect continuous describes an event/activity looking back from the present, whereas the past perfect continuous describes an event/activity looking back from the past:

*A: You look rested and refreshed. B: I have been sleeping a lot lately*
*I was feeling exhausted because I had been working all day*

*The guys have been playing loud music for hours*
*I couldn’t stand it anymore. My neighbours had been playing loud music all night*