

Apartment Hunting: A Little Grammar

I know that, when you talk about apartments—or apartment hunting—you're not thinking much about grammar. But, it's a good opportunity to review some grammar I'm sure you think you know: the **simple present** and **present perfect**. These are among the first verb forms that anyone learns, but there are a few twists that surprise some of my students.

What You Probably Already Know

You most likely know that the present perfect refers to things you do *in general*. With my students—almost all of them Germans—I like to use the example: “I drink beer.” In my classrooms, almost everyone drinks beer. . . sometime. But, of course, there are no beer bottles in the classroom. Most of my students take lessons at work, or on their way to work. They *can't* drink beer in lessons. And the others normally drive home. This much is clear: no alcohol in English lessons. (Though many of my students think they speak better English after a beer or three.)

So, we move from “I drink beer—which is in the simple present—to “I'm not drinking beer.” And now we're in the present progressive. And we talk about what we are—or aren't—doing: “I'm learning English.” “I'm not driving a car.” “I'm sitting on a chair.” “I'm not speaking German.”

This much is easy? Right? Well, in a second, we're going to talk about some things you might not know about the two tenses—and mainly the present progressive—but first, just a short word about conjugation.

Forming The Simple Present and Present Perfect

You probably know this, so we'll keep it short. **To form the simple present, you don't do anything to the verb. . . except add an 's' in the third person.** (The third person is 'he, she, it.')

The verb “eat” in the simple present is conjugated:

- I eat a pizza.
- You eat a sandwich.
- He eats chicken.
- She eats her lunch.
- It eats dog food.
- We eat too much.
- They eat fast food.

It's that simple. And the present perfect is formed using a conjugation of the verb 'be' (am, is, are) and the 'ing' form of the verb:

- I am driving to Las Vegas.
- You are eating my pizza.
- He is bothering me.
- She is wearing a nice dress.
- It is raining outside.
- We are flying in an Airbus.
- They are serving drinks now.

Easy, right? Just remember this: for the negative forms of the verb, we simply use “am not”, “aren't” and “isn't.”

But you knew all that, right? Let's get back to what you might not know.

Some Examples With My Apartment Hunt

When I talk about the apartment hunt, I use both verb forms a lot. For the things that we want, or for the things that we do in our apartment, I use the simple present:

- We want to live near a park, because we walk our dog every day.
- We cook a lot, so we want a big kitchen.
- My wife likes it hot, so we need cheap heat.
- I work in the city, so I want to live in the city.

This is clear, right?

When I talk about what exactly is happening in the apartment, I use the present progressive. (Did you see it in that sentence?) The present progressive is common, not only because it tells us what's happening in the moment, but because it has different meanings:

- We're looking for an apartment near the Great Garden.
- We're visiting an apartment on Sunday.
- We're moving at the end of April.
- Right now, we're living further from the center, in Seidnitz.

Let's look at those examples. The first one is the present progressive the way we all know it: what's

happening *right now*. But it's a little different from the examples I used a few minutes ago, because maybe I'm not looking in this moment. When I talk to my students, I'm not apartment hunting (though I did ask them if they knew of any good apartments), I'm teaching. Does that mean I'm lying if I say “We're looking for an apartment near the Great Garden” in a moment when I'm not looking at all?

Of course not. A nice English teacher like me would never lie. What it means is that I'm in the middle of a project that will end. (If it was something I generally did, I'd use the simple present, remember?)

I like to imagine these projects as being 'still on the desk.' When I'm in the middle of something and I have to leave it, I don't put it away. Instead, I leave my desk covered in papers and notes and coffee cups. Then, when I'm at work I say “I'm working on a new post for my website” or “I'm planning my vacation.”

Those statements are true because I've started but I haven't finished. All of us have a few projects 'still on the desk.' Right now, we're all at work but:

- I'm building a model.
- You're training for a marathon.
- He's painting his apartment.
- She's learning English.
- We're hunting for a new apartment.
- They're teaching their children to swim.

None of it is *in this moment*, but they're all *unfinished projects*.

The next example is “We're moving at the end of April.” This one you might know, too. Or maybe you think it's a typo. I'm saying this in February, May is the future. . . how can I use the present progressive? Shouldn't I use the simple future to talk about something that will happen in the future?

The simple answer is, “yes, probably.” But, somehow it became normal to use the present progressive when we talk about a plan in the future. Because we have already signed the lease—the rental contract—for the new apartment and we're hiring a moving company. (See? There's another good example: we're not hiring them *in this moment*, but we've started the process, so it's a project 'on our desk.')

Anyway, we're taking all the steps to move and we've set a date for the end of April and we're getting offers from moving companies. So, it's a pretty solid plan: “We're moving at the end of April.”

When you use the present progressive and mean it as a future form, it's important to remember that you have to include the time! Often, this will be clear from the context. If you ask me “Do you have any plans for April thirtieth?” I can answer “We're moving into our new apartment.” But if the time isn't clear, make sure you include it.

Also, the word 'maybe' doesn't belong in a sentence like this. If you don't have a solid plan, then use the simple future: “Maybe we'll see Vienna this year.”

The next example is also different from what you might think: “We're living further from the center, in Seidnitz.” You don't need to know where Seidnitz is in Dresden to find this sentence a little strange. . . Shouldn't it be “We live in Seidnitz?” And I have to answer “Normally, yes.”

I think I might have said “I live in Seidnitz” five hundred times to my students. They often want to know where in Dresden I live and what I think of 'their' city. And, when I said it, it was grammatically correct (and not just because I'm the teacher!). When I said it, it was true: I *generally* lived in Seidnitz. But, as soon as we found the new apartment, it stopped being *generally* true. It became something we do *right now*, but will stop in the near future. “We're *living* in Seidnitz.”

That's part of the 'feeling' that's possible in English. Just by changing the verb form, you can make it clear that you always do something, or that you're going to stop doing something.

Imagine, for one moment, that you are a smoker. You can—and probably *should*—say “I smoke.” It's generally true. But, when you decide to quit, you can say “I'm smoking, but I'm also quitting.” The present progressive makes it clear that 'smoking' is an action that will end.

In Conclusion

Congratulations, first, on making it through a lot of grammar! I know that it's the least interesting part—for most people, anyway—about learning a language. But, it's important if you want to sound as smart as we all know you are. Also, the better you understand grammar, the more clearly you can make small differences in the meaning of your sentences.

Today we talked about the simple present a little—that it means things you *generally* do—and quite a lot about the present progressive. We talked about the normal meaning of the present progressive: things you are doing in this moment. And we talked about some additional meanings: unfinished projects 'on your desk,' plans you have for the future, and things you will stop doing in the future.

I hope that I've been able to help. If you have any specific grammar questions, don't hesitate to contact me! I'm happiest when I can help!