

The English Pasts (Part One)

Many English learners who don't come from the U.S. or English are aware that they speak 'foreign English' but aren't sure how to sound more like a native speaker. Here, we're going to start looking at the different pasts in English and how to use them appropriately. Mastering them is a big step towards 'sounding native.'

In this lesson, we'll look at the two most common past tenses, which just happen to be the two most commonly confused by English learners who are still thinking in their native language: the simple past and the present perfect.

The Simple Past

Sometimes called the -ED Past, the 'simple past' is 'simple' to form, because regular verbs are made past by adding an -ed to the end: 'learn' becomes 'We learned English' and 'paint' becomes 'He painted my house.' This is similar to the German *Präteritum*: '*Wir lernten Englisch*' and '*Er malte mein Haus*.'

German speakers may note that they almost never use the *Präteritum* when they're speaking German. In English, however, we use it much more often. When Germans fail to use it where it should be used, it sounds 'funny' to native English ears. It's a big part of what makes 'German English' sound German.

Practice: Complete the sentences with the simple past form of the verb in parenthesis.

1. _____ to work this morning. (drive)
2. Yesterday, Udo Jürgens _____ my car (fix)
3. When I was younger, my favorite color _____ blue. (be)
4. My family _____ Christmas Songs around the tree when I was a kid. (sing)

Answer the questions with the simple past.

5. What did you do yesterday?
6. What did you do on your last birthday?

The Present Perfect

Call this the 'have past.' This is the form built by combining 'have' with the past participle of

the verb, sometimes called the 'third form' of the verb. Consider the verb do: it's conjugated do, did, done. 'Done' is the third of the three forms, and it's the past participle. 'I have eaten' and 'We have played Poker all night' are all examples of the present perfect.

Practice: Complete the sentences with the present perfect form of each verb.

7. So far this week, I _____ a lot of English. (learn)
8. I own every CD Udo Jürgens _____ so far. (make)
9. I _____ never _____ to Rome, but I want to go. (be)
10. _____ you ever _____ Sushi? It's better than I thought. (eat)

Answer the following questions using the present perfect.

11. What have you done so far today?

12. How many jobs have you had since you were eighteen?

So When Do I Use Which Form?

Understanding the pasts in English has to begin with the rules, but English learners should never forget that English is a language with a lot of 'language feeling.' In many circumstances, both tenses can be used, with subtly different 'feelings.' We can have fun with the 'feelings,' but only after we've covered the rules.

Consider whether you're talking about **finished time** or **unfinished time**. Finished times are, in other words, times that are *over*: yesterday, last year, last week. In fact, though many times are finished, anything beginning with 'last' is over. Unfinished times are times that are 'open.' It's possible to have done things in the past 'this year,' though this year isn't over. Times beginning with 'this,' from 'this week' to 'this month' and 'this pay period' are all unfinished.

Practice: List as many finished and unfinished times as you can quickly think of:

13. Finished times:

14. Unfinished times:

The **simple past** is matched with **finished times**. When a time is finished, we use the simple past. Consider the following sentences:

- Yesterday we went to the zoo.
- My mother-in-law visited without warning last month.
- Udo Jürgens gave a great concert on the nineteenth of January.
- I hated spinach when I was a kid, but now I love it.

The **present perfect** is matched with **unfinished times**. When talking about unfinished times, it's normal to use the present perfect in English, like in these examples:

- I've been to three different countries this year.
- My wife has dealt with a lot of stress this month.
- We have talked about many topics since the English lessons started.
- The President has increased spending six times since being elected.

That, simply, is 'the rule,' for when we use the simple present or the present perfect. It's not difficult to learn, but it's difficult to make automatic. And it's even more difficult to understand when we 'break' the rule. For example, though we never use the present perfect in with finished times, we often use the simple past in unfinished times. Does it seem complicated? The 'feelings' of the different tenses will help.

Practice: Using the finished times you thought of in number thirteen, write sentences here.

Practice: Using some unfinished times from number fourteen, write sentences here.

Practice: First, decide whether the following sentences use finished or unfinished times and complete them with the correct form of the verb in parenthesis.

15. This month _____ a good month for me. (be)

16. My sisters _____ me twice since I moved to Dresden. (visit)
17. When I was five, I _____ down the stairs. (fall)
18. What _____ you _____ today? (eat)
19. Shakespeare _____ a lot of stuff. (write)
20. Dan Brown _____ some pretty good books. (write)
21. My car _____, yesterday. (break down¹)
22. English _____ fun, so far! (be)

The Different 'Feelings'

A good rule of thumb² is that the **present perfect is used for unfinished things** while the **simple present indicates that something is finished**. As an example, if you see your English teacher at McDonald's between lessons and you've done all of your homework, you can proudly say "I did all of my homework." If, however, you only did the first three of seven tasks but you plan on doing all seven, you tell him "I've done the first three, and I'll finish the rest tonight."

Why? Because your English teacher knows the different *feelings* the two forms have, and if you tell him "I did the first three. . ." he will think that you view the **action** of finishing your homework as finished. That is: he'll think you aren't planning on doing any more of the homework. When you say "I've done the first three. . ." you're telling him how much you've done, but you're also letting him know that you're planning on doing the rest, too.

Continuing the example, suppose you told your teacher you had done the first part of the homework when you were in McDonald's. But then, you know how it is, you just didn't have time to finish your homework like you'd planned. By the time you see your teacher again at lessons, it's too late to do anything else, so the **action** of doing your homework isn't unfinished anymore, it's finished. (Even though the homework itself is unfinished, shame on you!) You tell him "I only did the first three activities." And your English teacher, because he's amazing and because this is the first time you haven't done your homework, doesn't yell at you.³

-
- 1 'break down' is a verb that we use often for cars, but for any complex piece of machinery or system. It means, simply, to stop working. Or to stop working correctly. ("Recently, the financial system broke down.") We conjugate it the same way we conjugate 'break,' adding 'down' at the end. Also 'a breakdown,' used as a noun, means the same thing: a failure.
 - 2 A "rule of thumb," in English, is a general rule. Maybe it's not always the case, but usually. As a rule of thumb, it's inappropriate to call your teacher a 'sadist,' just because he gives you homework. A rule of thumb for English learners is that practice is better than expensive lessons.
 - 3 Why do you think the present perfect is used in the sentence ". . . the first time you haven't done your homework. . ." You'll find the explanation after the solutions to the exercises.

As another example, imagine a husband planning the family vacation. When his wife gets home from work, he's researched destinations online, compared hotel prices, and balanced the stress of driving against the cost of flying. When the wife asks "So, what's the plan?" There are two things he can answer, and both are grammatically correct, but one of the two possibilities is 'right' (in the context of the marriage) and another will earn him a night on the couch. Which of the two possibilities is which?

- **I planned. . .**
- **I've planned. . .**

You'll find the explanation after the solutions to the exercises.

Exercise: Read the sentence describing the situation, and then fill in the statement with what you would say.

23. *It's your turn to clean the kitchen and your partner asks how much you've done. You want him or her to know that, while you've accomplished a lot, you plan on doing the rest, too.*

"I _____ the pots, pans and dishes. I _____ the stove and the microwave, too." (clean)

24. *Your boss stops into your office to talk about a report you wrote. He wants you to explain some of the facts you included.*

"I _____ that English was the world language because a very authoritative American told me so." (write)

25. *You and your child are reading the Harry Potter series together. Right now, you're in the middle of the third book, and you're telling a friend about your reading.*

"We _____ the first two books and we're working on the third one, now. It's a nice good-night tradition." (read)

26. *Nobody believes you that your best friend—now 30 years old—was a rebel⁴ when he was younger. But you try to tell them, anyway.*

"I'm telling you, he _____ too fast, _____ too much and _____ like a man possessed." (drive / drink / dance)

4 'Rebel' can mean someone who resists authority, but also someone who just has 'too much fun,' usually by breaking the rules.

Another 'feeling connection' that's important to make is that the **present perfect is used for things that still affect the present**. We're talking here about things that have happened in the past, but that have a direct result that can still be felt in the present. If your best friend calls you and says “I've locked myself out of my apartment,” the 'feeling' is that he's still standing in front of his apartment, and probably feeling pretty stupid. If he calls and said “I locked myself out of the apartment,” then, because the simple past connotes⁵ that the problem is 'finished' or solved.

Similarly, someone might say “I ate breakfast, today,” even though 'today' is technically 'unfinished time.' Why? The reason is, first, that that person probably isn't thinking of eating breakfast again, so the action really is 'finished' for him. Second, if the statement comes many hours after breakfast, when the person has become very hungry again, then there's no effect to be felt in the present. (The effect would be that the person is full.) On the other hand, if someone invites me to lunch after I've already eaten, I answer “No thanks, I've just eaten.” As long as I'm too full to eat again, it's safe to say there's an affect in the present!

Practice: Read the situation and then complete the sentences with the verb tense that fits best.

27. *You get to a meeting late, because you had to stop on the way due to car problems.*

“Sorry I'm late, the car _____.” (break down)

28. *After eating in a new restaurant in town, your entire family has stomach problems.*

“It probably isn't serious, I think it's just what we _____” (eat)

29. *You've been working on your English for a while, and you're really proud of it.*

“I'm not saying it's perfect, but I _____ a lot.” (learn)

Thanks for Reading

I hope that this little worksheet has helped you (I used the present perfect, because it's not finished helping, there are still exercises to be done). Do the exercises, think about the past tenses you use in English and think about why other people choose the tenses that they do. In no time at all, you'll start to feel that you're English has become Englisher. ('Englisher' really isn't a word.)

⁵ 'connote' is an uncommon word in English and refers to the fact that a word has a second or third meaning, sometimes a 'hidden' meaning. It's what a word 'connotes' that makes a *Hausmeister* want to be called a *Facility Manager*, even though the work—and more importantly, the pay—is the same.

Even More Practice!

If you've read through the worksheet, doing the exercises as you go, it's probably a good idea to put the worksheet aside for a day or two, and then do these exercises as a sort of review.

1. What are some things you've done this year?

2. What are some things you did last year?

3. If you're talking to your spouse⁶ in the middle of the day, will you ask “What did you do today?” or will you ask “What have you done today?” Why?

4. If you talk to your spouse as you're going to bed, would you ask “What did you do today?” or “What have you done today?” Why?

5. You're talking to a good friend and she says “I've driven into the city.” Where is she now? How do you know?

6. An English-speaking friend of yours sends you a text message. He says that “the car broke down.” Do you think he wrote it from the side of the road? How do you know?

⁶ A 'spouse' in the generic term for 'married partner,' it can mean either a husband or a wife.

Solutions to the practice exercises from the text

1. I **drove** to work this morning.
2. Yesterday, Udo Jürgens **fixed** my car.
3. When I was younger, my favorite color **was** blue.
4. My family **sang** Christmas songs around the tree when I was a kid.
5. I don't know what you did yesterday, maybe you **worked, drove, traveled, ate, slept** or **learned** English?
6. I don't know the answer to this, either. Maybe you **partied, celebrated, sang, ate** cake, **went** to a nice restaurant, or **bought** yourself something nice?
7. So far this week, I **have learned** a lot of English.
8. I own every CD Udo Jürgens **has made** so far.
9. I **have** never **been** to Rome, but I want to go.
10. **Have** you ever **eaten** Sushi? It's better than I thought.
11. Who knows? Perhaps you've **eaten breakfast** or you **have answered emails**. I know you **have learned** a little about the pasts, maybe you've **talked** on the phone, too.
12. I don't know about you, but I **have had** seven jobs since I was eighteen!
13. There's no limit to the finished times you can think of. Any time beginning with 'last,' of course. But also dates in the past: 'December sixth, 2002' or 'my twelfth birthday.' Remember, some times in the past don't have dates so much as names: 'when I was a kid,' 'back in college,' and 'before I was married' are all good examples.
14. There are also many possible unfinished times. Any time beginning with 'this,' like 'this year' qualifies, but so do times that begin with 'since.' 'Since I was a kid,' or 'since I finished college' and never forget 'so far,' that's an unfinished time, too.
15. This month **has been** a good month for me.
16. My sisters **have visited** me twice since I moved to Dresden.
17. When I was five, I **fell** down the stairs.
18. What **have** you **eaten** today?
19. Shakespeare **wrote** a lot of stuff. (He's dead, so his life is pretty well a finished time.)
20. Dan Brown **has written** some pretty good books. (As of this writing, Mr. Brown's life isn't a finished time. We use the present perfect.)
21. My car **broke down** yesterday.
22. English **has been** fun so far! (I don't know about you, but it's been fun for me!)
23. "I **have cleaned** the pots, pans and dishes. I **will clean** the stove and microwave, too."
(**Have cleaned** is in the past, but it's not finished. You still have work to do!)

24. "I **wrote** that English was the world language. . ." (**Wrote** fits best here because your boss is talking to you about a report you've finished.)
25. "We **have read** the first two books and we're working on the third one, now. . ." (**Have read**, because you aren't finished reading the series. When you're done, you can say "We **read** the Harry Potter series together.")
26. "I'm telling you, he **drove** too fast, **drank** too much and **danced** like a man possessed." (These are all in the 'simple past' because your friend apparently doesn't act like that, anymore.)
27. "Sorry I'm late, the car **broke down**." (Simple past here, because the break down has apparently been taken care of. After all, you *did* make it to the meeting.)
28. ". . . I think it's just what we **have eaten**." (Present perfect in this case, because, though the meal is in the past, there's a very clear effect on the present.)
29. "I'm not saying it's perfect, but I **have learned** a lot."

Solutions to the practice exercises from after the text.

1. 'Yesterday,' 'last week' and 'last year' are all finished times. But also, any time entirely in the past is a finished time: 'in 1982,' 'when I was a kid,' and 'on my eighteenth birthday' are all finished times, too. Unfinished times include 'this year,' 'this month,' and 'this week,' but also any other time that is still ongoing, including: 'since I was a kid,' 'Ever since my parents died' and 'Until now.'
2. Did you use the present perfect in your answers? This year is unfinished.
3. Did you use the simple past in your answers? Last year is finished.
4. I'd ask "What have you done today?" After all, you can't assume that your spouse will do nothing for the rest of the day, can you? The present perfect indicates that they aren't finished with their day, yet.
5. Here, I'd ask "What did you do today?" The day is over, and you're married, so it's not very likely that you'll be doing much after you go to bed. (That part was a joke.) The simple past gives the question a 'feeling' that the day is over.
6. She's still in the city. You can tell because she's used the present perfect ("I've driven. . .") that indicates that there's an affect on the present. In this case, the affect is that she's still in the city. When she's home, she'll tell someone else that "I drove into the city, today."
7. He's not standing alongside the road. If he were, then he'd have used the present perfect to indicate that there's an affect that's still being felt. He didn't. The fact that he used the simple past indicates that the problem has been solved and things are back to normal.

Footnote Number One

“It's the first time you haven't done your homework” is in present perfect because we're talking about an open time. You've been in lessons for a while, but you aren't finished, so the present perfect is the right tense to use.

In general, we also use the present perfect when we talk about things we've never done. “I've never been to Rome” is in present perfect, because we understand the time to be 'in my life' and your life isn't over.

Interestingly, this 'feeling' has a twist to it. When my grandmother uses the simple past in talking about her life, it sounds like she's stopped living. If she says “I never went to Rome,” there's a sad feeling of 'and I never will' that a good English speaker understands.

The Vacation Example

Every well-trained husband knows that, when you're talking to your wife about plans you've made, you use the present perfect. (**I've planned. . .**) The reason is simple: using the simple past (**I planned**) makes the planning sound complete and finished and, even if the husband thinks it is, he knows the wife will be upset if she doesn't feel like she's had a chance to comment on the plan.

By saying “I've planned a fifteen day trip to Dresden to see the *Sächsische Schweiz* and drink good beer,” he lets her know that the plan is still open and that she's still welcome to offer her comments. Also, he helps ensure that he won't be fighting with the dog for a good spot on the couch at night.