

The present simple, the present continuous (also called present progressive), the past simple and the present perfect are the four tenses we use most frequently in spoken English. Here is an overview of how to form each of these four tenses and when to use them.

Present simple

To form the present simple, we use the infinitive without the word *to*. But when a verb comes after *he/she/it* or the subject, we add an *-s* (or in some cases *-es*) to the infinitive without *to*.

We use the present simple for:

- a) facts
– *Our company **employs** 52,000 people worldwide.*
- b) permanent situations, i.e. when you don't know if or when a situation will end
– *I **live** in Ulm.*
- c) routines and regular activities
– *Johannes **goes** home to see his family every weekend.*

Present continuous (or present progressive)

To form the present continuous, we use the verb *to be* + the verb in the *-ing* form. Sometimes you have to take away or add an extra letter to the verb in the *-ing* form, e.g. *having*, *travelling*.

We use the present continuous for:

- a) things you're doing at the time of speaking or writing
– *I'**m writing** to enquire about a summer internship at your company.*
- b) short-term or temporary activities, i.e. you know they will end and you usually know when
– *We'**re** currently **working** on a new research project.*

Past simple

To form the past simple, we use the infinitive without the word *to* + the ending *-ed*. If the infinitive without *to* ends with an *-e*, you have to take this letter away first and then add *-ed*. This verb form stays the same with all subjects.

The past simple form of irregular verbs is always different and there is no rule for how to form it - irregular verbs need to be learned individually.

Examples

Regular verbs	Irregular verbs
<i>to listen → listened</i>	<i>to drive → drove</i>

We use the past simple to describe:

- a) finished actions or events
– *I **applied** for an internship at KPG last year, but I **didn't** get it.*
- b) a sequence of actions or events in the past
– *First I **took** the bus to the railway station, then I **got** on the train...*

We usually use the past simple together with an expression for a time in the past, e.g. *yesterday*, *last week*, *ten years ago*. If we don't use a time expression with the past simple it's usually because we already know that the action or event happened in the past.

Present perfect

To form the present perfect, we use *have* or *has* (for he/she/it) + the past participle (or third) form of the verb. For regular verbs, the past participle is the same as the past simple form and ends in *-ed*. The past participle of irregular verbs is always different and there is no rule for how to form it – irregular verbs need to be learned individually.

Example

Regular verb

to discuss → *We have discussed*

Irregular verb

to write → *She has written*

Unlike other English tenses, the present perfect can be used for both finished and unfinished actions and situations. We use the present perfect for:

- a) finished actions in the past where the exact time when the action happened isn't important
 - *I've finished* the essay Mrs Billich gave us.
- b) finished actions in the past which have an effect now
 - Cosima *has* just *fallen* over and hurt her ankle.
- c) situations that started in the past and are still happening now
 - *I've lived* in Erfurt since 2010.