

Lesson 02: The simple past tense

Definition of the simple past tense

The simple past tense, sometimes called the preterite, is **used to talk about a completed action in a time before now**. The simple past is the basic form of past tense in English. The time of the action can be in the recent past or the distant past and action duration is not important

When do we use the past simple?

In general, we use the **past simple** to express the **past tense** in English. An event in that tense happened before now and is always **completed**. How **long** the event lasted is not important, although it frequently appears with time adverbials or past time expressions that define a **fixed point** in the **past**. In detail, the following cases are typical:

The **past simple** is used ...

- ... to talk about actions or processes that happened **once** or **repeatedly** in the **past** and that are **completed** (key words: **yesterday, last month, last year, two weeks ago, in 1999** etc.):
 - *"I **bought** a new car two months **ago**."*
 - *"Sabrina **arrived** in London very late **last night**."*
- ... for actions that happened **consecutively** in the past which means one after the other in a short time:
 - *"He **came** home, **opened** the window and **took** a bath."*
 - *"Sue **bought** a book, **went** home and **started** to read it straightaway."*
- ... in order to express **past habits** (which is often done by utilizing **'used to'**):
 - *"When I was a child, I **used** to eat a lot of chocolate every day."*
 - *"I always **took** the underground when I lived in London."*
- ... when an action **started** in the past while **another** one was **ongoing**:
 - *"When I was taking a shower yesterday, the police **knocked** on my door."*
 - *"We were walking down the street when the accident **happened**."*
- ... in order to express a **condition** with the **if-clause type II** (**2nd conditional sentence**):
 - *"If I **had** a million euros, I would go on a trip around the world."*
 - *"Gerard would earn more money if he **worked** harder."*

How do we form the past simple?

The **formation of the past simple** is relatively easy for **regular verbs** as in most cases we only

need to add the ending **'-ed'** to the **infinitive** form of the verb. **Irregular verbs** have special forms, which can be found in the second column (past) of the list for irregular verbs.

Rule for conjugating the simple past

Regular verbs → **infinitive (base form)** + ending **'-ed'**

Irregular verbs → **special forms according to the list**

In **negative** sentences as well as in **questions**, the **past tense** of **'to do'**, which is **'did'**, is used together with the **infinitive** of the corresponding verb. To get an overview of the forms, compare the table below and these examples:

- **Example sentences** including verbs conjugated in the **past simple**:
 - "Peter **went** home after the party."
 - "All my brothers **played** the piano."
 - "**Did** you **see** the football match yesterday?"

Positive/affirmative sentences

Person/pronoun	Positive	Short form	Interrogative form	Short form of question
I you he/she/it we/you/they	They played .	–	Did they play ?	–

Negative sentences

Person/pronoun	Negative	Short form	Interrogative form	Short form of question
I you	You did not play .	You didn't play .	Did you not play ?	Didn't you play ?

Person/pronoun	Negative	Short form	Interrogative form	Short form of question
he/she/it we/you/they				

Additional examples

- “I *worked* hard yesterday.”
 - sentence with the regular verb ‘to work’
- “The kid *caught* the ball.”
 - sentence with the irregular verb ‘to catch’

Exercise 01: fill in the gaps with the right past tense verb.

1. Yesterday I very hard because we had an important presentation for some new customers. (work)
2. Unfortunately, I burnt my finger when I the stove. (touch)
3. Of course you are tired! You and your friends cards until twelve o'clock last night! (play)
4. When I was a child I once off the roof and broke my leg. (jump)
5. I everything yesterday so please no complaints! (clean)
6. Last time my husband it took me two hours to wash the dishes. (cook)
7. Come on, don't you want to come over again? Last time you us was four months ago. (visit)

8. All my colleagues to that radio show yesterday but I thought it was a bit boring. (listen)

10. Paul is a very nice man. He me with my move last year. (help)

11. Have you heard? Jane and Noel are getting married. – Yes, I know. Last week, they me to their wedding. (invite)

Formation of the past simple of modal auxiliary verbs (*can, must, may, used to, ought to*)

The following **modal auxiliary verbs** have **unique** forms in the **past simple**, which may sometimes **differ** in meaning. Compare the following example sentences as well as the use in the table below:

- o *We **were allowed to** pass.*
- o *“She said she **might** move to Australia.”*
 - ‘*may*’ can also become ‘**might**’ for grammatical reasons
- ‘**used to**’ semi verb expresses past habit
 - o *“We **used to** go to parties.”*
 - o *“**did** you **used to** go jogging every day?”*
 - o *“He **didn’t use to** go out before moving here.”*
- ‘**ought to**’ is only occasionally utilized; in most cases, ‘**should**’ is preferred instead:
 - o *“We **ought to** get home early.”*
 - o *“This **ought to** be enough.”*
 - o *“They **ought to** study the language.”*

- Examples of the auxiliary verbs ‘**can, must, used to, ought to**’ in the **past tense** as they may occur in a sentence:
 - o *“When Jim was a child, he **could** speak Italian fluently.”*
 - o *“The policeman said I **had to** get out of the car.”*
 - **Be careful** when using ‘**must**’ – it becomes ‘**had to**’.

Verb forms of ‘*can, ought to, must, used to, may*’ in the past simple


The column 'Past Simple' shows the proper forms of the **modal verbs**. Not every modal verb has such a form.

Note: Although the substitute form represents the past of the respective modal verb, there may be a (slight) difference in meaning to the normal forms.

Modal verb	Past simple	Possible substitute or alternative form in the past
can	could	was/were able to
must	–	had to or had got to (British English)
may	might	was/were allowed to
used to	used to	–
ought to	ought to	–

Examples and particularities of the modal verbs 'can, ought to, must, used to, may' in the past simple

The following example sentences show the use of the modal verbs in the past (simple). Consider the particularities, which some modals offer:

- 'can' is **'could'** in the past simple and the substitute form **'was/were able to'**; examples:
 - "He **could** easily win every race when he was young."
 - "I **was able to** get in without a ticket."
 - There is a slight difference in meaning between both forms.
See 'can' and 'be able to'  to learn the details.
- 'must' can form the past simple only with the alternative form **'had to'** or **'had got to'**:
 - "I **had to** pay the bill."
- - "She received an emergency call and **had got to** go early."
- 'may' has the substitute form **'was/were allowed to'** or the actual past **'might'**:

Present	Past	Past participle
be (am/is/are)	was/were	been
become	became	become
begin	began	begun
bereave	bereft/bereaved	bereft/bereaved
blow	blew	blown
break	broke	broken
bring	brought	brought
build	built	built
burn	burnt/burned	
buy	bought	

resent	Past	Past participle
can	could	(no participle)
catch	caught	caught
choose	chose	chosen
come	came	come
cut	cut	cut
deal	dealt	dealt
dive	dived (American English: dove)	dived (American English: dove)
do	did	done
draw	drew	drawn
dream	dreamt/dreamed	dreamt/dreamed

resent	Past		Past participi
drink	drank		drunk
drive	drove		driven
eat	ate		eaten
fall		fell	fallen
feed		fed	fed
feel		felt	felt
fight		fought	fought
find		found	found
fly		flew	flown
forbid		forbade	forbidden
forget		forgot	forgotten
forgive		forgave	forgiven
freeze		froze	frozen

get	got	got (American English: gotten)
give	gave	given
go	went	gone
grow	grew	grown

H

hang	hung/hanged	hung/hanged
have	had	had
hear	heard	heard
hide	hid	hidden
hold	held	held

hurt	hurt	hurt
K		

keep	kept	kept
know	knew	known
L		

lay	laid	laid
lead	led	led
learn	learnt/learned	learnt/learned
leave	left	left
lend	lent	lent
let	let	let
lie	lay	lain
light	lit/lighted	lit/lighted
lose	lost	lost
M		

make	made	made
may	might	(no participle)
mean	meant	meant
meet	met	met
melt	melted	molten/melted
mistake	mistook	mistaken
P		

pay	paid	paid
prove	proved	proven/proved
put	put	put

Q

quit	quit/quitted	quit/quitted
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R

read	read	read
rid	rid/ridded	rid/ridded
ride	rode	ridden
rise	rose	risen
run	ran	run

S

say	said	said
see	saw	seen
seek	sought	sought
sell	sold	sold
send	sent	sent
set	set	set
shake	shook	shaken
shall	should	(no participle)
shoot	shot	shot
show	showed	shown/showed
shrink	shrank/shrunk	shrunk
sing	sang	sung
sink	sank	sunk
sit	sat	sat
slay	slew	slain

sleep	slept	slept
slide	slid	slid
smell	smelt/smelled	smelt/smelled
speak	spoke	spoken
speed	sped/speeded	sped/speeded
spend	spent	spent
spill	spilt/spilled	spilt/spilled
spin	spun	spun
split	split	split
spread	spread	spread
stand	stood	stood
strike	struck	struck
strive	strove	striven
swear	swore	sworn
sweat	sweat/sweated	sweat/sweated
swim	swam	swum
swing	swung	swung

take	took	taken
teach	taught	taught
tear	tore	torn
tell	told	told
think	thought	thought
throw	threw	thrown
tread	trod	trodden



understand	understood	understood
undertake	undertook	undertaken

wake	woke/waked	woken/waked
wear	wore	worn
weave	wove	woven
wed	wed/wedded	wed/wedded
weep	wept	wept
wet	wet/wetted	wet/wetted
win	won	won
write	wrote	written