

Past Tenses in English

A clear guide to the four past tense forms — their meanings, uses, and the subtle differences that make your English precise and natural.

GRAMMAR

ENGLISH LANGUAGE



Made with **Gamma**

The Simple Past

COMPLETED ACTIONS



The Simple Past describes actions that **started and finished** at a specific time in the past.

Form

Verb + **-ed** (regular) or irregular form

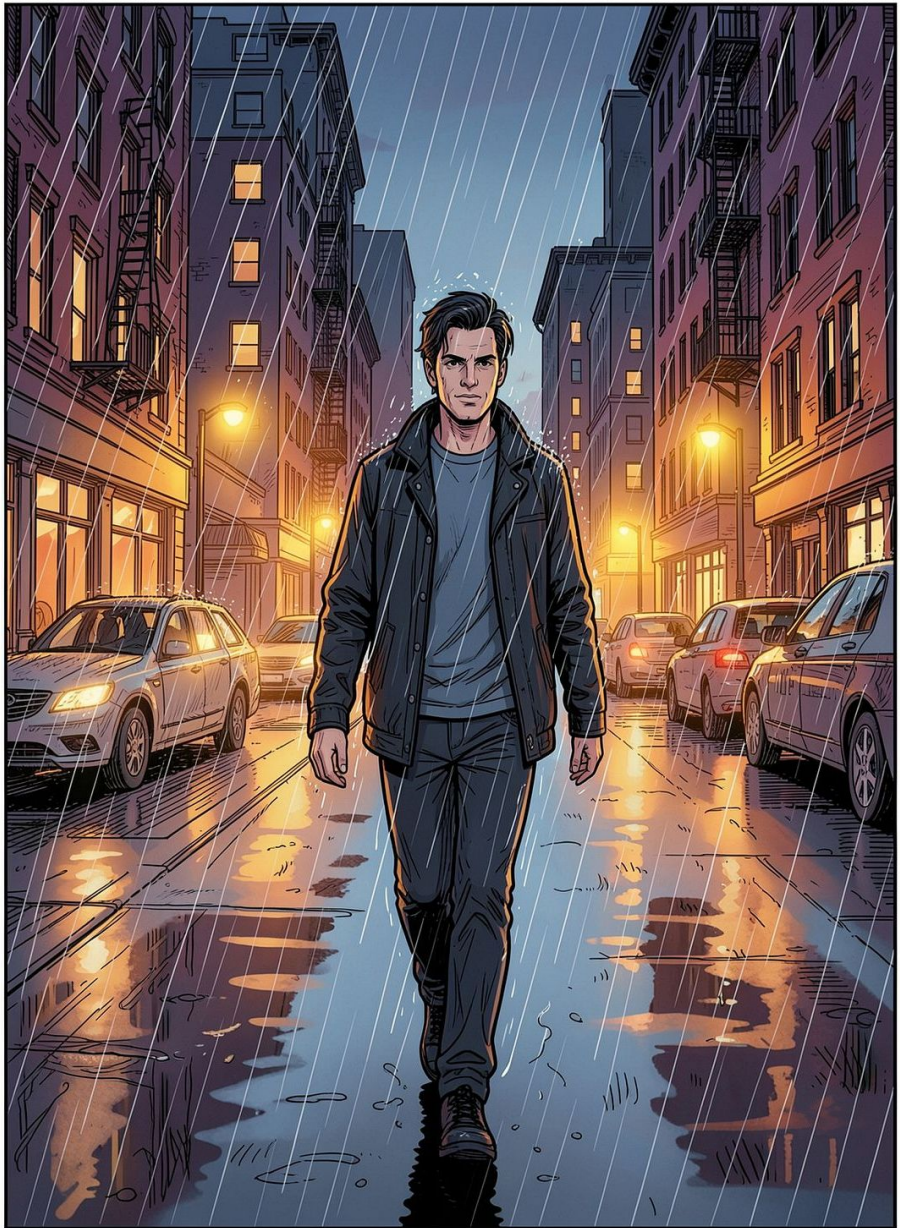
Examples

"She **walked** to school."

"They **ate** dinner at 7pm."

Key Signal Words

yesterday, ago, last week, in 2010



The Past Continuous

ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

The Past Continuous describes an action that was **ongoing at a particular moment** in the past — often interrupted by another event.

Form

was / were + verb-ing

Example

*"I **was reading** when the phone rang."*

Use Case

Background actions, interrupted events, or parallel activities

The Past Perfect

EVENTS BEFORE OTHER PAST EVENTS

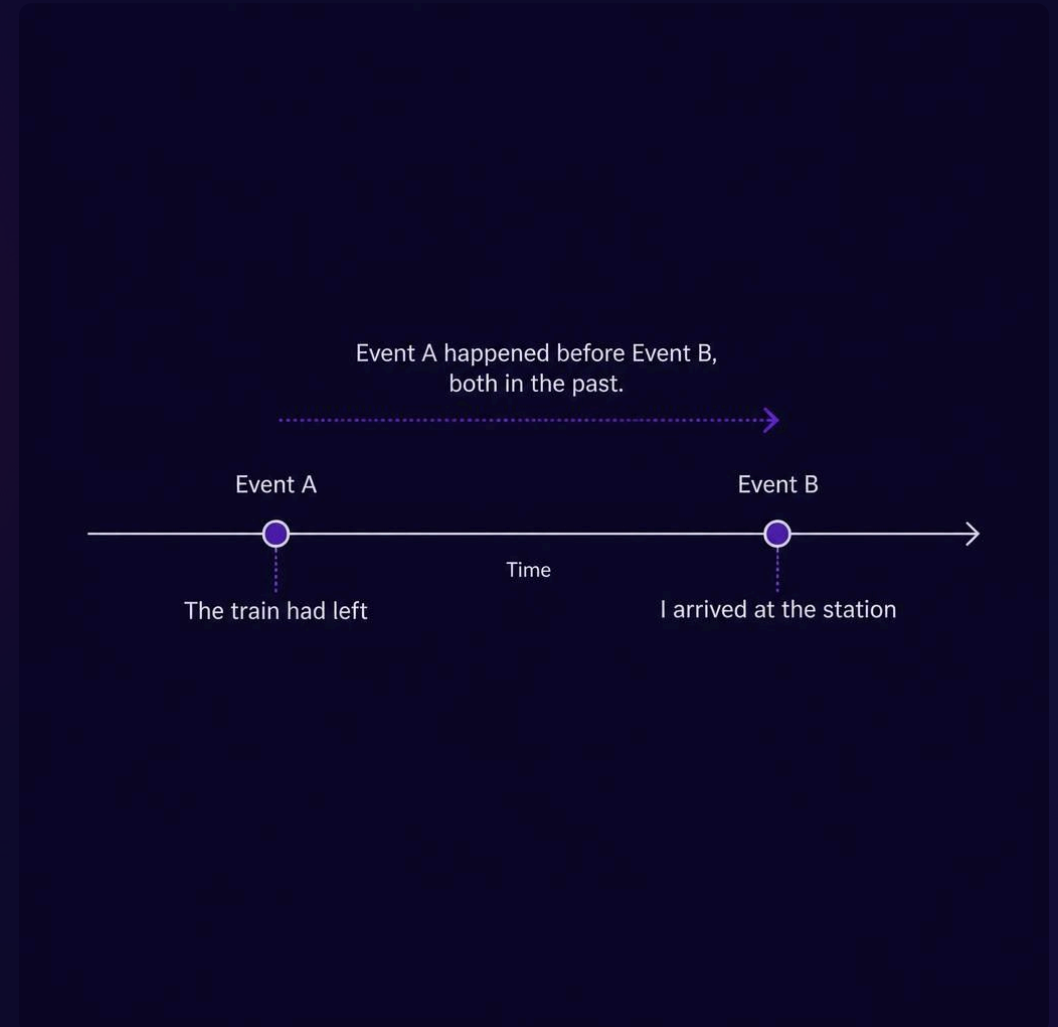
What It Does

The Past Perfect places one past action **before another past action**. It clarifies the order of events.

📄 **Form: had + past participle**

*"When I **arrived**, the train **had already left**."*

The train left **first**. The arrival happened **after**.



The Past Perfect Continuous

DURATION LEADING UP TO A PAST EVENT

This tense emphasises **how long** an action had been in progress before another past moment.

1

Form

had been + verb-**ing**

2

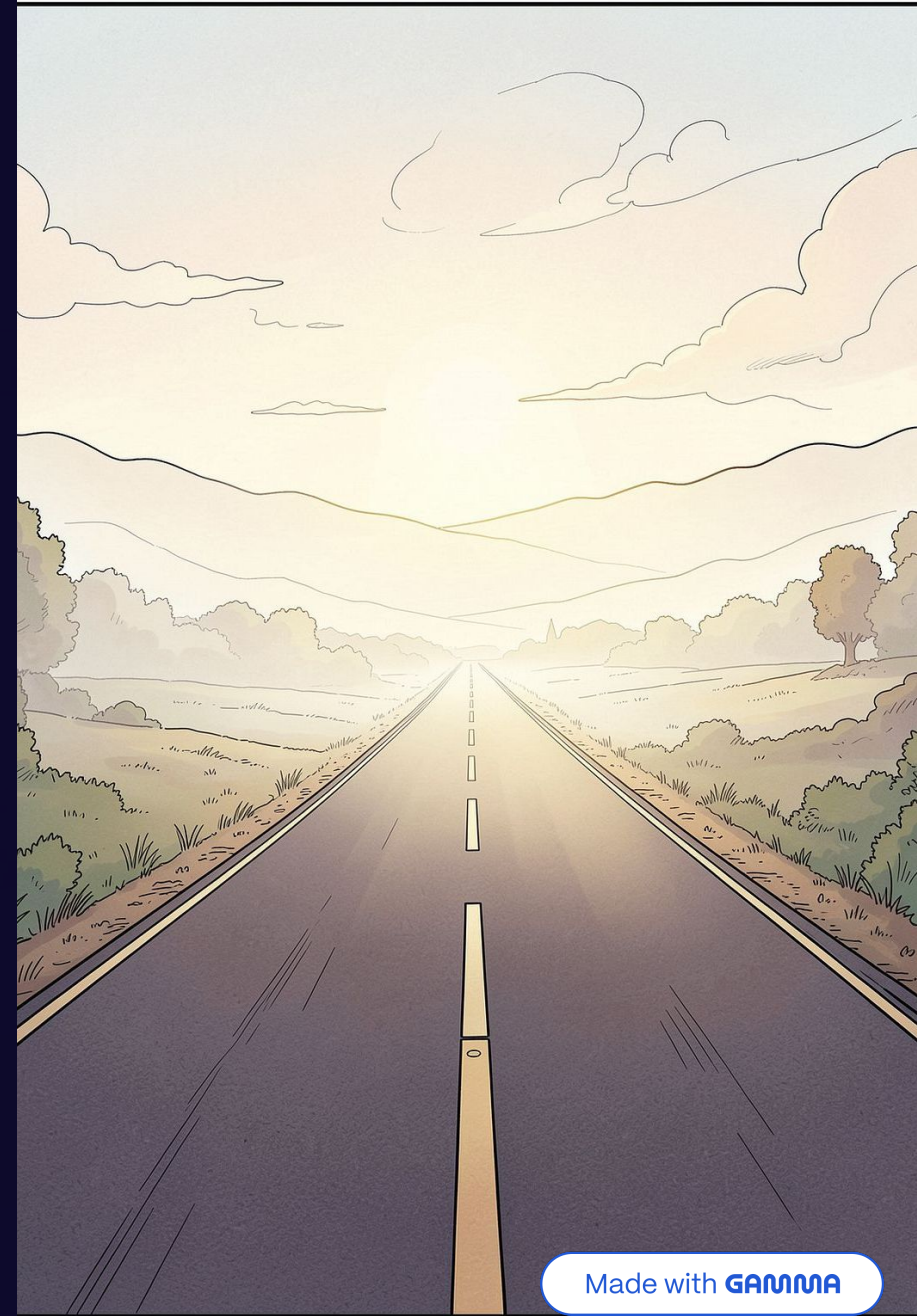
Example

*"She **had been waiting** for an hour when he finally arrived."*

3

Key Idea

Focus on the **duration** of an activity, not just its completion



Regular vs. Irregular Verbs

A CRUCIAL DISTINCTION

Regular Verbs

Add **-ed** to form the past.

- walk → **walked**
- play → **played**
- watch → **watched**

Irregular Verbs

No fixed rule — must be **memorised**.

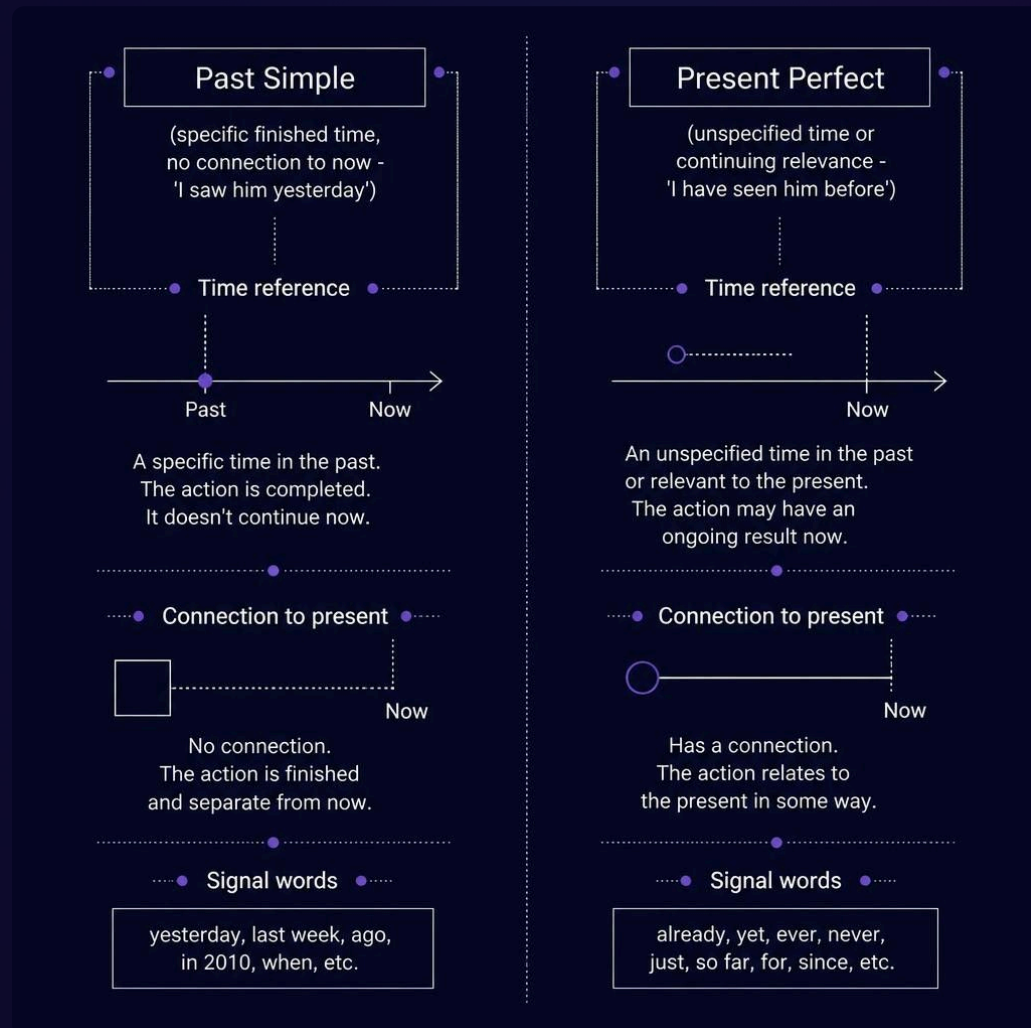
- go → **went**
- eat → **ate**
- write → **wrote**



❏ There are over **200 common irregular verbs** in English. Learning them in groups (e.g. sing/sang/sung, ring/rang/rung) helps.

Past Simple vs. Present Perfect

COMMON CONFUSION



Key Difference

The **Past Simple** refers to a **finished** time. The **Present Perfect** connects the past to **now**.

- **Past Simple:** "*I **lost** my keys.*" (They're found now.)
- **Present Perfect:** "*I **have lost** my keys.*" (Still lost!)

📌 **Signal words:** Past Simple → *ago, yesterday, last...* | Present Perfect → *just, already, yet, ever, never*

Common Mistakes & How to Avoid Them

1 Using Simple Past with "since" or "for"

✗ "I lived here for 5 years." → ✓ "I **have lived** here for 5 years."

2 Confusing Past Simple and Past Perfect order

✗ "After he left, I had arrived." → ✓ "After he **had left**, I arrived."

3 Forgetting irregular past forms

✗ "I goed to the shop." → ✓ "I **went** to the shop."

4 Practice Tip

Write short diary entries using all four past tenses. Review irregular verbs in themed groups weekly.

