## Verbal Aspect: Simple, Progressive, Perfect, and Perfect Progressive

### Learning Objectives

Identify the aspect of a verb

### Key Takeaways

#### Key Points

* Aspect gives us additional information about a verb by telling us whether the action was completed, continuous, neither, or both.
* The simple aspect is for actions that are neither completed nor continuous.
* The perfect aspect is for actions that are completed, but not continuous.
* The progressive aspect is for actions that are continuous, but not completed.
* The perfect progressive aspect is for actions that are both continuous and completed.
* All verbs have both tense and aspect. Because there are three verb tenses and four verb aspects, there are twelve possible combinations of tense and aspect.

#### Key Terms

* **tense**: A quality of verbs which indicates whether the verb occurred in the past, present, or future.
* **aspect**: A quality of verbs which indicates whether the verb is continuous, completed, both of those, or neither.

### Verb Aspect

We need tense to know if an event took place in the past, present, or future, but that’s not all we need in order to know what happened. Aspect gives us additional information about a verb by telling us whether the action was completed, continuous, neither, or both.

“Aspect” refers to the flow of time. Does the action take place in a single block of time, does the action occur continuously, or is the action a repetitive occurrence? There are four main aspects: simple, progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive.

Since all verbs have both tense and aspect, all combinations of tenses and aspects, such as past progressive and future perfect, are possible. Think about it this way: tense tells us when an action began, and aspect tells us whether that action was continuous, completed, or something else.

### Simple

The simple aspect describes a general action, one that is neither continuous nor completed. It is usually used to describe an action that takes place habitually.

### Simple Past

Verbs in simple past describe a normal or habitual action that began in the past,  and used to happen but no longer does.

* June rode her bike to work every day that year.
* You had a dog when you were young, right?

### Simple Present

Verbs in simple present describe a habitual action that still occurs in the present.

* My dad always enjoys novels about bakeries.
* Grandma drops me off at the bus stop every morning.

### Simple Future

Verbs in simple future describe an action that will begin in the future, and occur with regularity or certainty. To describe an action that will happen in the future, precede your main verb with “will,” “shall,” or another word or phrase indicating that the action occurs in the future.

* The sun will rise at 6:38 AM tomorrow.
* She will call you back after dinner.

### Progressive

The progressive form expresses continuous actions that happen over a period of time. They almost always involve some combination of the verb “to be” paired with the main verb ending in -ing.

### Past Progressive

Past progressive verbs express actions that began in the past and were continuous, but did not continue into the present. In the past progressive tense, the main verb is paired with the past tense of the verb “to be” (was/were) to show that the action occurred continually in the past.

* She was always saying stuff like that.
* I was running late all morning.

### Present Progressive

Present progressive verbs express actions that are continuous, and are still happening at the present moment. In present progressive, the main verb is paired with the present tense of the verb “to be” (is/are) to show that the action is happening currently.

* Phil is running around the block.
* Are you enjoying your tacos?

### Future Progressive

Future progressive verbs express actions that will begin in the future and be continuous. In future progressive, the main verb is paired with the future tense of the verb “to be” (will be) to show that the action will begin in the future.

* I will be heading home around nine o’clock.
* He will be traveling around the Yukon later this year.

### Perfect

The perfect form refers to events that have been completed, but are still relevant to the speaker in the present moment. It almost always involves some form of the verb “have” combined with another verb.

### Past Perfect

Verbs in past perfect express an action that both began and was completed in the past. Use “had” paired with the main verb in simple past tense.

* We had left before the stadium got crowded.
* Don’t worry, Emmett had already ruined the surprise.

### Present Perfect

Verbs in present perfect express actions that began in the past, and have just now been completed. Use “has” or “have” paired with the main verb in simple past tense.

* Omar has finished his dinner.
* Laura and Tomika have arranged the memorial.

### Future Perfect

Verbs in future perfect express actions that will be completed in the future. Use “will have” paired with the main verb in simple past tense.

* I hope you will have completed your report by then!
* They will have won over half their games by the end of the season.

### Perfect Progressive

The perfect progressive, just as you would expect, is a combination of the perfect and progressive aspects. Perfect progressive refers to the completed portion of an ongoing action. It almost always involves a form of the verb “have” and a form of the verb “to be” combined with a verb ending in -ing.

### Past Perfect Progressive

Verbs in past perfect progressive express a continuous, completed action that had taken place in the past. Use “had been” combined with the -ing form of the main verb.

* She was tired because she had been running.
* I had been lying awake for hours when the alarm went off.

### Present Perfect Progressive

Verbs in present perfect progressive express a continuous action that began in the past and continues into the present. Use “has been” or “have been” combined with the -ing form of the main verb.

* He has been working on his paper all morning.
* The librarians have been helping me with my research.

### Future Perfect Progressive

Verbs in future perfect progressive express a continuous, completed action that will have taken place in the future. Use “will have been” combined with the -ing form of the main verb.

* By the time the winter ends, we will have been getting a foot of snow every week.
* This spring, I will have been working for Cool Stuff, Inc. for twenty years!

In [English grammar](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-english-grammar-1690579), *aspect* is a [verb](https://www.thoughtco.com/verb-definition-1692592) form (or category) that indicates time-related characteristics, such as the completion, duration, or repetition of an action. (Compare and contrast with [*tense*](https://www.thoughtco.com/tense-grammar-1692532).) When used as an adjective, it's *aspectual*. The word comes from Latin, meaning "how [something] looks"

“Aspect” refers to whether a verb is continuous, completed, both continuous and completed, or neither continuous nor completed.

The two primary aspects in English are the [perfect](https://www.thoughtco.com/perfect-aspect-1691604) (sometimes called *perfective*) and the [progressive](https://www.thoughtco.com/progressive-aspect-grammar-1691682) (also known as the *continuous* form). As illustrated below, these two aspects may be combined to form the *perfect progressive*.

In English, aspect is expressed by means of [particles](https://www.thoughtco.com/particle-grammar-term-1691585), separate verbs, and [verb phrases](https://www.thoughtco.com/verb-phrase-1692591).

When a language has a grammatical system that relates mainly or largely to the time of an action, relative to the time of speaking, then that will get called a "tense" system. But if there is a system that has to do more with whether the speaker is thinking about the content of an ongoing action, or about the action as a complete, finished thing, than with \_when\_ it happens, then that system might be called a system of "aspect" -- and this is particularly likely if there is another grammatical system for which "tense" is an appropriate name, so that a different name is required.

Generally speaking, aspect describes a detail or an aspect   
of tense. I think the clearest example in Modern English is progressive vs simple   
present/past.   
  
The present progressive "It is raining" means it is raining at this moment and that   
it started sometime in the past and will stop at a point in the future (even if the   
window is only a few seconds).   
  
Contrast that with the "It rains" which could mean at this moment, but often means   
that it rains a lot under these conditions (e.g. in this climate, in this location, at this   
time of year). In other words, even though "it rains" is present tense, it may not   
actually be raining at the moment. Thus the English simple present can be both   
the present tense or a habitual present form.   
  
In the past tense, "It was raining yesterday" (progressive) and "It rained   
yesterday" (simple) are closer in meaning, but the progressive means that it was   
raining exactly at a moment in question (often when something else was   
happening) while the simple past tends to refer to the overall event without a   
particular moment in mind. It could even be a habitual form (e.g. "It rained a lot in   
July").   
  
Aspect, in relation to tense, is difficult to describe because there is a lot of   
variation across languages. Not every language has a progressive aspect. In   
addition, distinctions in meaning can be subtle and can change over time, even in   
related languages.

First of all, it is perfectly possible for `tense' and `aspect' to exist separately in a language. In particular, there are human languages without a grammatical category that we would in English normally call `tense'; Chinese is an example; but, as far as i know, \*every\* human language includes something that would normally be called `aspect'.   
  
Let me clarify this a little bit. When i say that Chinese has no tense, that doesn't mean that Chinese can't express such concepts as past or future, only that it doesn't do so by any marking on the verb. What Chinese does instead, if it's necessary to include clear information about tense in a particular sentence, is to include in that sentence some adverbial that clearly conveys past or future meaning; equivalents in English would be expressions like `yesterday', `tomorrow', `last week', `next year', etc.   
  
On the other hand, as far as i know \*every\* human language includes some means of marking the verb so that it's clear (if you're fluent in the relevant language) whether you're talking about something that happens only once and it's over, or happens repeatedly, or whether you're focussing on an event as an ongoing event (`internal' view) or as a pointillistic event (`external' view).   
  
Using, and expanding on, some examples from English borrowed from one or another of my colleagues:   
  
It rained yesterday. (Perfective aspect, external point of view -- you're treating it as an event that happened, that's over now, end of story.)   
  
It was raining yesterday when ... (Imperfective/continuous aspect, internal point of view -- you're focussing on a \*background\* condition that was \*ongoing\* at the time you are referring to.)   
  
It was raining yesterday when Roger came over. (Means that, when Roger came, it was raining at that moment, and it had been raining for some time before that and continued to rain for some time after that moment.)   
  
It rained yesterday. Roger came over. (The hearer can't tell, because the speaker isn't vouchsafing, whether it was raining at the moment that Roger came over or not. The most that a reasonably-intelligent fluent speaker of English can deduce is that at some point yesterday it rained, and at some point yesterday Roger came over, but these two events do not necessarily intersect.)

Examples and Observations

**Perfect Aspect**  
The perfect aspect describes events occurring in the past but linked to a later time, usually the present. The perfect aspect is formed with *has*, *have*, or *had* + the [past participle](https://www.thoughtco.com/past-participle-1691592). It occurs in two forms:​

[**Perfect Aspect, Present Tense**](https://www.thoughtco.com/present-perfect-grammatical-aspect-1691672)**:**  
"History *has remembered* the kings and warriors, because they destroyed; art *has remembered* the people, because they created."  
(William Morris, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, 1897)​

[**Perfect Aspect, Past Tense**](https://www.thoughtco.com/past-perfect-verbs-1691593)**:**  
"At fifteen life *had taught* me undeniably that surrender, in its place, was as honorable as resistance, especially if one had no choice."

(Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969)

**Progressive Aspect**  
The progressive aspect usually describes an event that takes place during a limited time period. The progressive aspect is made up of a form of *be* + the *-ing* form of the [main verb](https://www.thoughtco.com/main-verb-grammar-term-1691297).​

[**Progressive Aspect, Present Tense**](https://www.thoughtco.com/present-progressive-grammar-1691673)**:**  
"She's loyal and *is trying* to wear her thin flippy hair in cornrows."  
(Carolyn Ferrell, "Proper Library," 1994)

[**Progressive Aspect, Past Tense**](https://www.thoughtco.com/past-progressive-verbs-1691595)**:**  
"I *was reading* the dictionary. I thought it was a poem about everything."

(Steven Wright)

**The Difference Between Tense and Aspect**  
"Traditionally . . . both aspects [perfect and progressive] are treated as part of the tense system in English, and mention is made of tenses such as the *present progressive* (e.g. *We are waiting*), the *present perfect progressive* (e.g. *We have been waiting*), and the *past perfect progressive* (e.g. *We had been waiting*), with the latter two combining two aspects. There is a distinction to be made, however, between tense and aspect. Tense is concerned with how time is encoded in the grammar of English, and is often based on [morphological](https://www.thoughtco.com/morphology-words-term-1691407) form (e.g. *write, writes, wrote*); aspect is concerned with the unfolding of a situation, and in English is a matter of [syntax](https://www.thoughtco.com/syntax-grammar-1692182), using the verb *be* to form the progressive, and the verb *have* to form the perfect. For this reason combinations like those above are nowadays referred to as *constructions* (e.g. the *progressive construction*, the *present perfect progressive construction*)."

(Bas Aarts, Sylvia Chalker, and Edmund Weiner, *Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar*, 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2014)

[present perfect progressive](https://www.thoughtco.com/present-perfect-progressive-verb-tense-1691670): *God knows how long I'****ve been doing*** *it.* ***Have*** *I* ***been talking*** *out loud?*

[past perfect progressive](https://www.thoughtco.com/past-perfect-progressive-verbs-1691594): *He* ***had been keeping*** *it in a safety deposit box at the Bank of America. For months she* ***had been waiting*** *for that particular corner location.*

**Present Perfect Progressive and Past Perfect Progressive**  
"The perfect **aspect** most often describes events or states taking place during a preceding time. The progressive aspect describes an event or state of affairs in progress or continuing. Perfect and progressive aspect can be combined with either present or past tense...Verb phrases can be marked for both aspects (perfect and progressive) at the same time: The perfect progressive aspect is rare, occurring usually in the past tense in fiction. It combines the meaning of the perfect and the progressive, referring to a past situation or activity that was in progress for a period of time."

One problem here is that (as with so much else relating to grammar) you can look at aspect and tense either as an abstract concept or in relation to the surface form of a particular language.   
  
So, in an abstract sense, aspect relates to ways in which languages express concepts relating to completion, iterativity, continuity, and so on. Tense relates to ways in which relation to time is expressed. These concepts interact with each other in complex ways which are marked in interestingly different ways by different languages (a student of mine, Akinmade Akande, has done especially interesting work on tense-aspect in Nigerian Pidgin English).   
  
In many languages (including Indo-European languages, from which so much of our terminology comes), tense and aspect are expressed in systems in the verb. When we write about these languages, linguists tend to use the traditional terms for the ways in which languages form the structures, using the terms rather differently from the way in which they are used when talking about tense-aspect as an abstract system.   
  
For example, in English, there are two formal 'tenses':   
I see (present)/ I saw (past)   
  
and two formal ways in which 'aspect' is marked:   
I see/ I saw (non-perfective & non-continuous)   
I have seen / I had seen (perfective)   
I am seeing / I was seeing (continuous).   
  
In many other languages closely related to English, such as German, the continuous is used less often than it is in English, and the perfective is not used in the same meanings as in English. The way in which the formal features relate to the more abstract systems is different.   
  
In many accounts of aspect, we are not necessarily as clear as we should be about whether we are referring to aspect/tense as abstract systems or as forms in a particular language.

For more detail, read Zeno Vendler's classic work "Verbs and   
Times". Vendler classified verbs into 4 types:   
1) States (e.g., "love")   
2) Activities (e..g, "rest")   
3) Accomplishments (e.g., "climb a mountain", "read a book")   
4) Achievements (e.g., "kill", "arrive")   
  
States and activities are inherently durative. Achievements are inherently   
punctual. Accomplishments can go either way. In English there are grammatical   
consequences.   
  
State verbs can't occur in the progressive (the McDonald's catch phrase "I'm lovin'   
it" is ungrammatical). Activity verbs often occur in the progressive. "What are you   
doing now? I'm resting"   
  
When achievement verbs occur in the progressive they get an iterative reading   
("he was killing flies all day"). It's ungrammatical in English to use an adverb of   
duration with an achievement verb without the iterative possibility (\*I killed a fly   
in/for 3 hours,). By contrast, accomplishment verbs can do those things (I read a   
book in/for 3 hours, when you called, I was reading a book).

