

PAST FORMS

Past simple

We use the past simple to talk about an event or action, or sequence of events / actions in the past. The past time is stated (last week, five years ago, etc.) or is clear from the context.

*I **moved** to Hong Kong two years ago.*

*He **rushed** to the station, **bought** a ticket and **jumped** on the first available train.*

Past continuous

We use the past continuous to talk about:

- activities or situations that were in progress in the past when another action took place

*We **were living** in New York when the financial crash happened in 2008. I **was working** for Lehmann Brothers, the bank that famously went bankrupt.*

- activities or states that describe the background to past actions

*My job **was going** well so I decided to stay in Chicago.*

Remember that we do not use state verbs in the continuous form.

Past perfect simple

We use the past perfect simple to talk about an action that took place at an earlier time than the main event in a narrative, especially when the events are not mentioned in the sequence they happened.

*John was in a bad mood when I met him. His bank card **had been swallowed** by a cash machine and the bank **had refused** to let him withdraw any cash.*

Past perfect continuous

We use the past perfect continuous to talk about an activity or state in progress before the main event took place.

*Laura wasn't happy. Her flight was overbooked and she **had been arguing** for nearly an hour with the check-in clerk before she managed to get a seat.*

used to and would

- In most cases we use the past simple to talk about things that were done in the past. However, we use *used to* + infinitive to talk about habits and states when we want to emphasize the habitual nature of past actions. These forms also indicate that these actions do not happen or exist now. *There **used to be** some beautiful old houses there, but they demolished them to make way for a shopping centre. I **used to play** tennis quite well when I was in my teens, but I haven't played for years.*
- We use *would* + infinitive to talk about habits (not states) that took place in the past but do not happen now. *In my first job, I **would** always **work** long hours, as I wanted to be promoted quickly.*

When we are reminiscing about the past, if we are describing a sequence of habitual actions, we often use *used to* for the first verb and *would* for subsequent actions.

*We **used to go** down the lake in the afternoons. We **would swim** and play around. We **would** also **try** to catch fish, but we never caught anything much.*

Notice that we don't use *would* + infinitive to talk about past states (i.e. with stative verbs).

*We **used to live** in the country until I was about nine years old. (not We ~~would live~~ in the country.)*

► Exercise 1

could and was able to

We use *could* + infinitive or *was able to* + infinitive to talk about past abilities.

*I **was able to swim** when I was four years old.*

If we are talking about an ability to do something on a specific (past) occasion or our ability to overcome a specific difficulty, we cannot use *could*. We must use *was able to* or *managed to* or *succeeded in* + *-ing*.

*The water was flowing fast and I was terrified. Luckily I **was able to grab** a branch and scramble to the bank.*

*He took his driving test six times. On the seventh occasion he **succeeded in passing** it.*

Notice that this rule does not apply to verbs of perception or in the negative.

*Once we reached the top of the building, we **could see** out over the entire city.*

*I found an old radio in the attic but I **wasn't able to** make it work.*

Past modal verbs

Modal	Past form
<i>must</i> (obligation)	<i>had to</i> + infinitive
<i>must</i> (speculation)	<i>must have</i> + past participle
<i>could</i> / <i>may</i> / <i>might</i> (possibility)	<i>could have</i> / <i>may have</i> / <i>might have</i> + past participle
<i>should</i> (advice)	<i>should have</i> + past participle

- We use *had to* + infinitive to talk about the necessity to do something at a particular time in the past. *We **had to drive** around the area for an hour before we found a parking space.*
- We use *must have* + past participle to make a deduction about a past event or action. *He **must have been** very unfit because he was breathing hard by the time we got to the top of the hill.*
- We use *could have* / *may have* / *might have* + past participle to speculate on a past event or action. *We realized that she **might have gone** to the wrong restaurant.*

- We use *should have* + infinitive to talk about something that was done in the past, but would have been better not done. They **shouldn't have invested** so much in one area of the business.

► Exercises 2 and 3

INVERSION WITH ADVERBIAL PHRASES

We often use adverbial phrases in narratives. Sometimes, to give emphasis within a sentence, we use inversion after an adverbial phrase (e.g. *no sooner*, *not only*, *only when*, *never*, *little*) when it is placed at the beginning of the sentence.

Never *had I seen* such a huge cake!

Little *did I realize* how much work the job would entail.

With some adverbial phrases, other changes in the sentence are needed, for example, the addition of a word to connect the two clauses.

We set off and then there was a loud bang and the train came to a shuddering halt.

No sooner *had we set off than* there was a loud bang and the train came to a shuddering halt.

Examples of adverbial phrases which are used at the beginning of the sentence are:

- Only by (+ -ing) ...
- No sooner ... than ...
- Not only ... , (but) also ...
- Not until ...
- Such ... that ...
- So + adjective ... that ...
- Hardly ... when ...
- Only when (+ subject + verb) , (inverted verb form) ...
- Only + clause

We were very captivated by the performance and entirely forgot the time.

→ **So captivated** *were we* by the performance **that** we entirely forgot the time.

When the smoke cleared, the extent of the damage became apparent.

→ **Only when** the smoke cleared *did* the extent of the damage *become* apparent.

Notice that many of these adverbial phrases using inversion are negative.

► Exercises 4 and 5

EXERCISES

- 1 Complete the conversations with the correct past tense of the verbs.

Conversation 1

- A: What ¹ _____ (you / talk) to Philip about when I walked in a moment ago?
 B: Oh he ² _____ (tell) me about his trip to America. He ³ _____ (go) to San Diego for a conference and then ⁴ _____ (stop) off in Las Vegas for three days on the way back home.
 A: What ⁵ _____ (he / think) of Las Vegas?
 B: He said you either love it or you hate it. Also he ⁶ _____ (not / appreciate) before what a cosmopolitan place it was. There were visitors from all over the world. He ⁷ _____ (meet) a Japanese couple who ⁸ _____ (go) there every year for the last forty years.

Conversation 2

- A: How was your meeting yesterday?
 B: It ¹ _____ (go) on far too long. Several people ² _____ (fall) asleep by the end!
 A: Why ³ _____ (you / not / leave)?
 B: I couldn't. I ⁴ _____ (be supposed) to be addressing the meeting, but I ⁵ _____ (not / get) a chance because Charles spoke for ages. By the time he ⁶ _____ (finish) speaking, everyone ⁷ _____ (be) desperate to get home.

Conversation 3

- A: Oh, there you are. I ¹ _____ (get) worried.
 B: Sorry, I ² _____ (get) held up in traffic. A lorry ³ _____ (overturn) on the A34 and spilled its load of live fish. A lot of other people ⁴ _____ (stop) and ⁵ _____ (try) to help pick them up.

- 2 Choose the correct option to complete the narrative. Sometimes both options are possible.

I ¹ *was loving / loved* the summer holidays when I was young. Some kids ² *used to say / would say* that they were too long, but it never seemed that way to me, because we ³ *were studying / had been studying* for months before they started. Not that we ⁴ *used to go / went* anywhere special for the holidays; we ⁵ *were living / lived* on a farm and there was always plenty to amuse us. I ⁶ *would often help / was often helping* Dad out with the jobs around the farm in the mornings and then when he ⁷ *used to finish / had finished* work for the day, he ⁸ *would take / took* us up to an area called the mounds, where you ⁹ *could see / were able to see* out over all the countryside. He ¹⁰ *built / had built* a small cabin for us there and we ¹¹ *would happily play / used to play happily* in it for hours or try to catch small animals like mice or rabbits. Once we even ¹² *could catch / managed to catch* a weasel.