

Lesson 2 - Simple Past vs. Present Perfect

Today we're going to cover the simple past and the present perfect. The present perfect can cause a lot of confusion for English learners because it is actually used in several different ways – and we also have the present perfect *simple* (I have done) and the present perfect *continuous* (I have been doing). This lesson will clear up any doubts you might have, with plenty of examples!

Simple Past vs. Present Perfect

There are two major differences between the **simple past** and the **present perfect**:

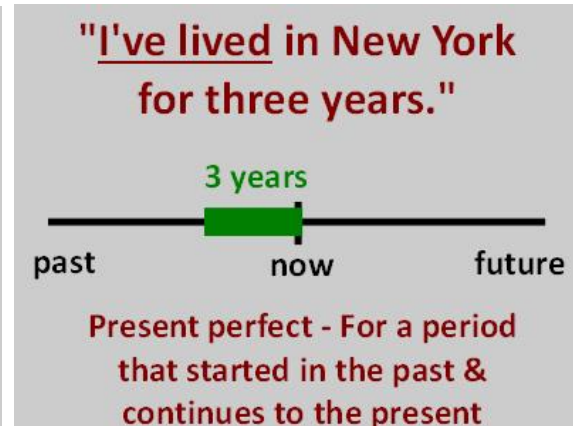
Finished vs. Unfinished Time

Use the simple past with **finished time**:

- **I worked** as a freelance writer from 1995-1998.
(a time period that started and ended in the past)
- **I lived** in New York for three years.
(implies that I do NOT live in New York now)
- **I didn't take** a shower this morning.
(spoken in the afternoon or evening; the morning is in the past)
- How many pages **did you read** yesterday?
(yesterday is finished)

Use the present perfect with **unfinished time** (time that starts in the past and continues until the moment of speaking).

- **I've worked** as an editor since 2011.
(a time period that started in the past, and continues until now)
- **I've lived** in New York for three years.
(implies that I DO still live in New York now)
- **I haven't taken** a shower yet this morning.
(spoken when it is still the morning; the morning has not yet ended)
- How many pages **have you read** so far today?
(today is not yet finished)



Put it into practice!

Say three sentences in the simple past about past periods in your life, which are finished. For example, where you lived as a child, what you studied at college, past jobs you've had, what you did yesterday, etc.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Now answer these four questions using the present perfect:

1. How long have you lived in your current residence?
2. How long have you worked at your current job?
3. What's one thing you haven't done yet today?
4. What's one thing you haven't done in your life yet, which you would like to do?

Specified vs. Unspecified Time

Use the simple past for events that occurred at a **specific, defined time** in the past.

- She **opened** several restaurants last year.
(the sentence gives a specific time for her action)
- We **left** the office an hour ago.
(we say specifically when we left the office)
- Back in January, I **didn't have** enough money to buy a car.
(during that specific month in the past, I did not have the money)

- **Did** you **try** the caviar at the banquet yesterday?
(asking about an experience at a specific past event)

Use the present perfect for events that occurred at an **unspecified (or unknown) time** in the past - or at any time in the person's life:

- She **has opened** several restaurants.
(she has opened restaurants at some point in her life, but we don't know or don't say exactly when)
- We've already **left** the office.
(we don't say specifically when we left the office. It could have been an hour ago, five hours ago, or ten minutes ago)
- I've never **had** enough money to buy a car.
(never in my life have I had the money)
- **Have** you ever **tried** caviar?
(asking about an experience at any time in your life)



Put it into practice!

Use the simple past to say a single thing you did...

- a few hours ago
- yesterday
- last week
- last month
- last year

Now use the present perfect to say three interesting things or accomplishments you've done at some point in your life. Remember NOT to say specifically when you did them.

1. I've...
2. I've...
3. I've...

Signal words

Some of the "signal words" for using the **simple past** are:

- ago
- in 1998, on Monday, at 6:00 (when referring to past times)
- last week/month/year
- yesterday

Some students ask, "Do you *always* need to specify the time when using the simple past? Do you need a signal word in every sentence?"

The answer is "No." Often we'll define the past time period in the first sentence, then continue talking about the past without using any more signal words, since the other person understands when in the past these events are happening:

*"I **had** the most stressful day last Friday. I **slept** through my alarm and **was** late to work, and my boss **yelled** at me. During the day so many projects **piled** up that I **missed** several important deadlines and **couldn't** even catch up on my e-mails. I **stayed** at the office until midnight and when I **got** home, I just **collapsed** from exhaustion."*



After the first sentence defines the context as "last Friday," the other past tense verbs continue to refer to that time period, without having to define it again and again.

Some of the "signal words" for using the **present perfect** are:

- ever, never

- already,* yet,* just,* recently*
- since (points in time), for (periods of time)
- today, this morning/afternoon/evening/week/month/year
- so far, up to now

With the signal words **already**, **just**, **yet**, and **recently**, there is an exception - many American English speakers use the simple past with these signal words, even though the present perfect is technically more correct:

- **I've already finished** my homework.
I already finished my homework.
- **We've just discovered** the mistake.
We just discovered the mistake.
- **Have you taken** out the garbage yet?
Did you take out the garbage yet?
- **She's recently written** a book.
She recently wrote a book.

Put it into practice!

Use the present perfect to say three things you've already done today:

- I've already...
- I've already...
- I've already...

Use the present perfect to say two things you've done recently:

- I've just...
- I've recently...

Finally, a quick note about **since** and **for**. You already know that we use **since** with *points in time*, and **for** with *time periods*:

If I moved into my apartment in 2009 and it is now 2014...

- I've lived in this apartment **since** 2009.
- I've lived in this apartment **for** five years.

We can also use **since** with a **simple past event** as our reference point, not a specific date:

- I've lived in this apartment **since** I graduated from college.
- He's hated broccoli **since** he was a child.
- They've been very busy **since** they got back from vacation.



Sometimes in sentences like this, we say **ever since** instead of **since**. The meaning is the same.

Put it into practice!

Say these seven sentences with either **since** or **for**:

After a few seconds, the answers will appear.

1. I've been waiting _____ 2:30.
2. We've been driving _____ the past three hours.
3. Joe and Jenna have been dating _____ six months.
4. Christina has been the CEO of the company _____ 2004.
5. I've wanted to learn how to cook _____ a long time.
6. He's been talking on the phone _____ a few minutes.
7. We've been living here _____ we got married.

Present Perfect Simple vs. Present Perfect Continuous

Let's quickly review how to form each of these tenses:

Present perfect simple:

- Subject + have/has + past participle of the verb
- Barbara has worked here for six months.

Present perfect continuous:

- Subject + have/has + been + -ING form of the verb
- Barbara has been working here for six months.

Now, when do we use each one?

With the verbs **live** and **work**, they are both used; there is no difference.

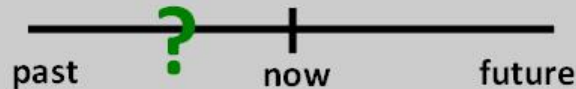
For other verbs and situations, the general rule is that we use the present perfect simple to emphasize **single events** and **results**; and we use the present perfect continuous to emphasize **ongoing activities** and **continuing processes**.

Here are some examples to make it clearer:

- She's **stopped** smoking recently.
(single event)
- She's **been trying** to stop smoking.
(ongoing process)
- He's **played** football in the state championships.
(single event)
- He's **been playing** football all afternoon.
(ongoing activity that continues until now)
- I've **typed** up these notes.
(single event. The result of the action is that the notes are now completely typed)
- I've **been typing** up these notes for the past two hours; my hands are tired.
(continuing process; the notes are not yet completely typed)
- I've **thought** about changing careers, but I'm too nervous to quit my current job.
(I've considered this at some point in the past, but I'm not considering it now)
- I've **been thinking** about changing careers. Do you know of any interesting job opportunities?
(I started considering this at some point in the past, and I'm still considering it now)
- **Have you seen** the movie?
(single event)
- **Have you been following** this TV show? It's so exciting; I can't wait for the next episode!
(ongoing activity/process)



**"I've typed up
these notes"**



The notes are finished. We don't know/say exactly when in the past we typed them

**"I've been typing up
these notes for the past
two hours."**



The notes are not yet finished. I started typing two hours ago, and am still typing now.

Finally, always use the present perfect simple (not continuous) with the verbs **believe, know, understand, like/dislike, belong, and own**:

- **We've known** each other since we were kids.
~~We've been knowing~~
- **I've never understood** math very well.
- **He's always liked** sports.

Put it into practice!

Use the present perfect continuous to answer these three questions:

- How long have you been studying English?
- What's something you've been thinking about lately?
- What's one hobby or activity you've been doing for some time?

Now use the present perfect simple to answer these five questions:

- What's one thing you've always liked?
- What's one thing you've always believed?
- How long have you known your best friend?
- What's one thing you've never understood?
- What's one thing you've never owned?

Summary:

- Use the simple past for finished time, and present perfect for unfinished time.
- Use the simple past for specified time, and present perfect for unspecified time.
- Use *since* with *points in time*, and *for* with *time periods*.
- Use the present perfect simple for single events and results.
- Use the present perfect continuous for ongoing activities/processes.

You've finished Lesson 2! Now take the quiz and do the practice exercise to help you review what you've learned.

Writing Task

Write a short autobiography describing your history and some of the accomplishments you have had in your life to date. Remember to use...

- The **present perfect** when you *don't* state the date of the action:
I've traveled to 12 countries.
- The **simple past** when you *do* state the date of the action:
I traveled to Australia in 2007.
- The **present perfect continuous** when describing an event you've been doing fairly continuously to this date:
I've been teaching English for the past five years.

If you would prefer not to write about your own life, then you could write a biography of somebody you know well (it should be someone who is still alive – a relative, a current politician or celebrity, etc.)

Send it to me at help@espressoenglish.net for feedback!

Practice Exercises

Simple past or present perfect?

Circle the correct answer:

1. **Did you pay / Have you paid** the bills last week?
2. **Did he ever go / Has he ever been** to Paris?
3. **We didn't go / We haven't gone** out this past weekend.
4. She **didn't make / hasn't made** up her mind yet.
5. How many donations **did we get / have we gotten** up to now?
6. **I called / I've called** him a couple minutes ago.
7. When I was 9, **I broke / I've broken** my leg while skateboarding.
8. **I took / I've taken** a bunch of books out of the library yesterday.
9. I **didn't have / haven't had** this much fun since I was a kid!
10. **She was / She's been** sick for the past three days.
11. They **didn't go / haven't gone** on vacation last year.
12. **Did/Have** my kids cut class on Friday?
13. **Did you see / Have you seen** Lindsay lately?
14. **We collected / We've collected** 100 signatures for our petition so far.
15. He **never flew / has never flown** in an airplane before.

Present Perfect Simple or Present Perfect Continuous?

Write the verb in the correct form, for example:

- He has **repaired** (*repair*) the oven – it's working now.
- He's **been watching** (*watch*) TV all afternoon; I wish he'd get off the couch!

Remember:

Present Perfect Simple: **have/has + past participle**

Present Perfect Continuous: **have/has + been + -ING form of verb**

1. Have you ever _____ (*stay*) at that hotel?
2. He's always _____ (*hate*) country music.
3. I've finally _____ (*recognize*) my error.
4. My computer has _____ (*run*) on battery power for almost four hours; I'll need to plug it in soon.
5. I'm so tired. I haven't _____ (*sleep*) well these days.
6. We've _____ (*look*) for a good tutor; can you recommend somebody?
7. I've _____ (*read*) that book - I finished it in three days!
8. We've _____ (*think*) about getting a cat. We're not sure yet.
9. He's _____ (*travel*) around Asia for the past three weeks, and he's planning to spend three more in Australia before coming home.
10. She's _____ (*exercise*); that's why she's all sweaty.
11. I've _____ (*miss*) a couple of episodes of the series.
12. My country's team has _____ (*win*) the World Cup four times.
13. We've _____ (*send*) the letter; you should receive it soon.
14. You've never _____ (*need*) my help with your homework before.
15. I've _____ (*stay*) with a friend until I can find my own apartment.

Answers

Since or For?

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2. We've been driving **for** the past three hours.
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4. Christina has been the CEO of the company **since** 2004.
5. I've wanted to learn how to cook **for** a long time.
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