Narrative tenses Unit 3

Past Simple and Present Perfect

**The Past Simple** differs from all three uses of the Present Perfect.

1. The Past Simple refers to **finished past**.

* Shakespeare wrote plays. (He's dead.)
* I've written short stories. (I'm alive.)

1. There is **no present result**.

* I hurt my back. (But it's better now.)
* I've hurt my back. (And it hurts now.)

3 It refers to **definite past**.

last night.

I saw him two weeks ago.

on Monday.

at 8.00.

Compare this with the indefinite adverbials (adverbial is a word or group of words playing the grammatical role of an adverb) found with the **Present Perfect**.

recently.

I’ve seen him before.

since January.

I haven't seen him yet.

for months.

I've never seen him.

just seen him

Note

Even when there is no past time adverbial, we can 'build' a past time in our head.

* Did you have a good journey? (The journey's over. You're here now.)
* Thank you for supper. It was lovely. (The meal is finished.)
* Where did you buy that shirt? (when you were out shopping the other day.)

Past Simple

**The Past Simple** is used:

1 to express **a finished action in the past**.

* Columbus discovered America in 1492.

2 to express **actions which follow each other in a story**.

* I **heard** voices coming from downstairs, so I **put** on my dressing-gown and **went** to investigate.

3 to express **a past state or habit**.

* When I was a child, we lived in a small house by the sea. Every day I walked for miles on the beach with my dog.

(This use is often expressed with used to. We used to live…. I used to walk…)

**Past Continuous**

The Past Continuous is used:

1. to express **an activity in progress before and probably after a time in the past**.

* I phoned at 4.00, but there was no reply. What were you doing?

1. to **describe a past situation or activity**.

* The cottage **was looking** so cosy. A fire **was burning** in the grate, music **was playing**, and from the kitchen **were coming** the most delicious smells.

1. to express **an interrupted past activity**.

* I was having a bath when the phone rang.

1. to express **an incomplete activity in the past**.

* I **was reading** a book during the flight. (But I didn't finish it.)
* I **watched** a film during the flight. (the whole film)

1. to express **an activity that was in progress at every moment during a period of time**.

* I was working all day yesterday.
* They were fighting for the whole of the holiday.

Notes:

The Past Simple expresses past actions as simple, complete facts. The Past Continuous gives past activities time and duration.

* 'What did you do last night?'
* 'I stayed at home and watched the football.'
* 'I phoned you last night, but there was no reply.'
* 'Oh, I was watching the football and I didn't hear the phone. Sorry.'

Notice how the questions in the Past Continuous and Past Simple refer to different times.

* When we arrived, Jan was ironing. She stopped ironing and made some coffee.
* What was she doing when we arrived? She was ironing.
* What did she do when we arrived? She made some coffee.

**Past Perfect**

The Past Perfect is **used to look back to a time in the past and** **refer to an action that happened before then.**

* She was crying because her dog **had died**.
* I arrived to pick up Dave, but he had already left.
* Keith was fed up. He'd been looking for a job for months, but he'd found nothing.

Notes:

The Past Perfect Continuous refers to longer actions or repeated activities.

The Past perfect Simple refers to shorter, complete facts.

* He'd lost his job and his wife had left him. Since then he'd been sleeping rough, and he hadn't been eating properly.

The Past Perfect can refer to definite as well as indefinite time.

* I knew his face immediately. I'd first met him in October 1993. (= definite)
* I recognized her face. I'd seen her somewhere before. (= indefinite)

**Past Perfect and Past Simple**

**Verbs in the Past Simple tell a story in chronological order.**

* John worked hard all day to prepare for the party. Everyone had a good time. Even the food was all right. Unfortunately, Andy upset Peter, so Peter left early. Pat came looking for Peter, but he wasn't there.

It was a great party. John sat and looked at all the mess. He felt tired. It was time for bed.

2 **By using the Past Perfect, the speaker or writer can tell a story in a different order.**

John sat and looked at all the mess. It had been a great party, and everyone had had a good time. Even the food had been all right.

Unfortunately, Andy upset Peter, so Peter left early. Pat came looking for Peter, but he'd already gone.

John felt tired. He'd been working all day to prepare for the party. It was time for bed.

Note

For reasons of style, it is not necessary to have every verb in the Past Perfect.

. .. Andy upset Peter ... Peter left ...

Once the time of 'past in the past' has been established, the Past Simple can be used as long as there is no ambiguity.

Time

Time clauses

1 We can use **time conjunctions to talk about two actions that happen one after the other**. Usually **the Past Perfect is not necessary in these cases, although it can be used**.

* **After I'd had/had** a bath, I went to bed.
* **As soon as the guests left/had left**, I started tidying up.
* I sat outside **until the sun had gone/went** down. (He came inside when the sun went down)

2 The Past Perfect can help to make the first action seem separate, independent of the second, or **completed before the second action started**.

* When I had read the paper, I threw it away.
* We stayed up until all the beer had gone. (When they drank all the beer, they went to bed)

3 **Two verbs in the Past Simple can suggest that the first action led into the other, or that one caused the other to happen.**

* When I heard the news, I burst out crying.
* As soon as the alarm went off, I got up.

4 **The Past Perfect is more common with “when” because it is unclear**. The other conjunctions are more specific. So the Past Perfect is not so essential.

* As soon as all the guests left, J tidied the house.
* Before I met you, I didn't know the meaning of happiness.
* When I opened the door, the cat jumped out.
* When I had opened the mail, I made another cup of tea.