

Grammar 4 – The Perfect Tenses

Welcome to a minefield!

No, it's not all that bad really, although gaining mastery of the Perfect Tense system is something which many students find difficult. Some students master the present and past, and appear to embrace the future forms with relative ease, yet fail to comprehend how and when to use the Perfect Tenses. We have seen many a good intermediate student fail to make additional progress because they have been unable to get to grips with this tense. So what is it all about? In this section we will look at 3 perfect forms; Past, Present and Future.

The Present Perfect – an introduction

The Present Perfect is a way of linking the past to the present. Whether it exists in other languages or not, it is a traditionally difficult concept for students to grasp and a notorious bugbear for teachers. A good sign of fluency in the English language is the ability to use it correctly. Do not attempt to teach the Present Perfect without the aid of a good grammar book (at least until you are familiar with it - we recommend 'The Good Grammar Book' by Swan). It is worth ensuring you become familiar with this tense as common interview questions for jobs include the following:

'Describe the 3 uses of the Present Perfect'

'How would you approach a lesson on the Present Perfect?'

'How would you explain the difference between the Past Simple and the Present Perfect Tenses to a class?'

By the end of this module you should be able to answer these questions. But first, look at the following statement from an American film bearing the same name:

'Honey, I shrunk the kids.'

'Honey' aside, does this sound like an English person said it? What would we be more likely to say if we were telling our partner that we had considerably shortened our offspring? Probably we would say something like:

'I have shrunk the kids.' or *'I've shrunk the kids.'*

This is the Present Perfect Simple. It is constructed in the following way:

subject	+	the auxiliary verb 'to have'	+	Past Participle of the action verb
(I/she etc.)		(have/has)		(shrunk)

Consult a verb table at the back of a good course book or grammar book to check on past participles if you are unsure of what they are. Here are a couple of examples:

Present tense	Past tense	Past participle
do	did	done
eat	ate	eaten
shrink	shrank	shrunk

There are 3 official 'uses' of the Present Perfect Simple. Each 'use' is best dealt with separately in the classroom, and we shall do the same here.

Use 1 – The Recent Past

This tells us that something happened in the past and is of relevance now. In the previous example:

'I have shrunk the kids.'

actually means:

'I shrank the kids in the past, and they remain shrunk to this day.'

When there is present evidence of this past action, we use the Present Perfect Simple. Look at these other examples:

'I have eaten.'

meaning that 'I ate recently and can still feel the effects.'

'You look like you've just seen a ghost.'

Something's shocked you and you still look pale.

The key issue here is that the timing of the event in the past is relatively unimportant. Of greater influence is the effect that the past event has on the present. This use is sometimes referred to as **giving news of recent events**.



As you may have guessed, the main confusion with the Present Perfect is not so much the form as when to use it. It is confused mostly with the Past Simple. Yet the Past Simple denotes something quite different. Look at the following example of the Past Simple:

We went to London yesterday.

The sentence indicates that I am not in London now, but that I was yesterday. The past denotes a finished action. It is not linked to the present but denotes a more finite, finished time.

Now, in the Answer Booklet, compare the following sentences:

- a) *'I lost my keys last Thursday.'*
- b) *'I've lost my keys!'*

Which sentence tells us that I haven't got my keys at the moment?
Which sentence doesn't tell us if I have my keys or not?
Which sentence is in the Present Perfect Simple?

GO TO ANSWER BOOKLET, QUESTION 5 (3 marks)

While we can see that both instances happened in the past, only the Present Perfect tells us that this event is relevant now. You can use questions like these in the classroom as quick 'concept checks'.

You can now see that there are subtle distinctions between the two tenses and understand why some students have difficulty, particularly if their own language doesn't make this distinction. Again, with the Present Perfect the exact time is not important. Only when using the Past Simple will we use words such as 'yesterday' referring to a more specific finished event in the past.