

English Language Lesson: Verbs

Just as nouns, the first of the eight parts of speech, play a key role in a sentence, so do verbs. In this lesson, we'll look at verbs – action or being words – and the way that they can be changed according to tense. We'll also look at verbals and common verb errors.

Verbs

There are two types of verbs: *action verbs* and *being verbs*. Action verbs tell what something is, was, or will be doing.

Examples: Jennifer *ate* pizza sticks for dinner.

Please *don't ring* the bell so loudly; it *hurts* my ears.

After the cathedral, the tour group *will visit* the museum.

Being verbs (also called state-of-being verbs and linking verbs) indicate that something exists in a form or state. The subjects in being verb sentences aren't doing anything. A being verb tells us what something is, was, or will be.

Examples: That dog *is* covered in fleas.

The new prime minister *will be* good for the country.

Where *was* the missing manuscript?

Note: Some verbs can act as either a being verb or an action verb. To determine the difference, ask if the subject is performing the action of the verb.

Examples: This salad *tastes* strange.

The sommelier *tastes* the wine.

In the first example, the salad is not performing the tasting; "tasting strange" is the state of being of the salad. In the second example, the sommelier is performing the action of tasting on the wine, making it an action verb.

The rugby team *looked* exhausted after the match.

The curator *looked* at the statue for a long time before leaving.

In the first example, the state of being of the team is "exhausted"; they are not performing an action. In the second example, the curator is doing the action of looking.

Verb Forms and Auxiliary verbs

Regular verbs can be conjugated into four forms. These forms are important, since they are the basis for all conjugations. All verbs have an *infinitive form* or a base form before conjugation. The infinitive form of a verb always begins with a "to." Examples: *to be, to eat, to smell, to run, to pontificate, to scream, etc.*

Examples:

Infinitive	Present	Past	Present Participle	Past Participle
To allow	Allow(s)	Allowed	Allowing	Allowed
To bake	Bakes(s)	Baked	Baking	Baked
To rejoice	Rejoice(s)	Rejoiced	Rejoicing	Rejoiced
To snore	Snore(s)	Snored	Snoring	Snores
To touch	Touch(es)	Touched	Touching	Touched

There are some important things to note. First, present tense has a slight deviation for third person – the addition of an “s” (see the chart under person and number). Second, past and past participle are identical in regular verbs; they are simply the addition of “ed” to the present form. Third, some verb endings (such as those ending in “ch”) add a letter to the present tense – a good dictionary will help you identify those.

Auxiliary verbs (also called helping verbs) are words which are added to the primary forms to create verb phrases. There are two types of auxiliary verbs: primary and modal.

Primary auxiliary verbs: Primary auxiliary verbs have two important properties. They change to match the subject of the sentence, and they can also stand on their own as independent verbs. There are three primary auxiliary verbs: *have*, *do*, and *be*.

Do: “Do” is used to express the negative, provide emphasis, and ask questions:

Examples: Hemmingway doesn't live in Cuba anymore. (negative)

Does Darren know how to set the Tivo? (question)

I do have three puppies for sale. (emphasis)

Notice that the auxiliary can be split from the primary verb (#1 & #2)

Have: “Have” is joined with participles to create the present form of verbs (see below: verb tenses). Have is also combined with modal verbs to express possibility.

Example: I have gone to the store five times this week.

The unicorn must have been a figment of your imagination.

Kaylin must have left the water running.

Be: “Be” verbs are combined with participles to create progressive verbs. (see below: verb tenses).

Verb Properties

In English, verbs change based on how they are used in a sentence. Verbs can be transformed out of their infinitive form according to five properties: tense, mood, person, number, and voice. The transformation all use one of the four verb forms

Person and Number

A verb changes according to person and number. Person indicates *who* is doing or being the verb.

Number indicates *how many* are doing or being. The table below is often used to help conjugate verbs according to person and number (pronouns are added as sample subjects):

	Singular	Plural
1 st person	1 person – me/I	More than one person – we/us
2 nd person	1 person – you	More than one person – you (all)
3 rd person	1 person – he/she/it	More than one person - they

Verbs change according to their person and number. Example (to throw):

	Singular	Plural
1 st person	I throw	We throw
2 nd person	You throw	You (all) throw
3 rd person ¹²	He/she/it throws	They throw

¹ When conjugating according to person and number, notice that there is a slight deviation for 3rd person present (see above “throw” versus “throws”), but for the remaining conjugations, all of the verbs remain consistent.

Verb tense

The tense of a verb indicates when in time the action or being of the verb occurred. Regular verbs in English change their form into six tenses: present, past, future, present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect. Each of the tenses is made up of one of or a combination of the four forms (past, present, past participle, present participle). The first three tenses (past, present, and future) can also take progressive forms.

-Present indicates that something occurs or is now, at the current time. Present verbs take the present verb form.

Example: I sing in the choir.

The lungs take in the air and transport it to the heart.

Californians like surfing in the ocean.

-Present progressive³ indicates that something is in the act of occurring now. Present progressive takes the present tense “to be” + present perfect form

I am singing in the choir.

The lungs are taking in the air and are transporting it to the heart.

Californians are liking surfing in the ocean.

-Past indicates that something happened at a fixed time before the present. Past verbs take the past form.

Example: The horses ate oats some days and grain on others.

The band Yellowcard played an amazing show.

Cathleen woke from a terrible nightmare.

-Past progressive indicates that something occurred over time in the past. Past progressive verbs take the past tense “to be” + present participle form.

The horses were eating oats some days and grain on others.

The band Yellowcard was playing an amazing show.

Cathleen was waking from a terrible nightmare.

-Future indicates that something will happen or be at some time after the present. Future verbs take “will” + present form OR present tense “to be” + “going to” + present form.

Example: The surgeon will begin the operation tonight.

I am going to clean the garage sometime soon.

The barrista will get you some coffee.

-Future progressive indicates that something will be happening over time in the future. Future progressive takes “will be” + present participle OR present tense “to be” + “going to be” + present participle.

The surgeon will be beginning the operation tonight.

I am going to be cleaning the garage sometime soon.

The barrista will be getting you some coffee.

Note: Note that, in formal English, “will” is occasionally replaced by “shall” (Example: The surgeon shall begin the surgery tonight).

² There are some irregular verbs that do not behave this way. The most significant of these is “to be.” There is a chart at the end of this lesson conjugating “to be.” A good English dictionary will indicate the remainder of the irregular verbs.

³ “Progressive” verb forms are also often called “continuous.”

-Past perfect indicates that something in the past occurred *before* something else in the past. Past perfect is formed by past tense “to have” + the past participle.

Example: I had gone to the store to get some apples when the shooting started.

The earrings had been gold before they discolored.

The dog had chewed a hole in the sofa before the babysitter noticed.

-Past perfect progressive indicates that something had been happening in the past before something else. Past perfect continuous is formed by “had been” + present participle

Example: I had been getting my milk at the corner market before it closed.

Car sales had been increasing until the economic crisis.

The dog had been chasing the cat every day until the cat ran away.

-Present perfect indicates that something occurred in the past and continues up to the present. Present perfect is formed by present tense “to have” + past participle form

Example: I have worked on my home every spare minute.

Bono has offered thousands of dollars to charity.

Stephanie has not seen the movie *Moulin Rouge*.

NOTE: The present perfect refers to a non-specific time – when the verb occurred doesn't matter. You cannot use the present perfect with specific times (ie. Yesterday, tomorrow, in 1946, at 3:00, etc., when I graduated, after work). You can use the present perfect with non-specific time words (etc. ever, once, before, several times, since, etc.)

-Present perfect progressive indicates that an action that started in the past is still going on. The present perfect continuous is formed by present tense “to have” + “been” + the present participle form

Example: I have been working on my home every spare minute.

Bono has been offering thousands of dollars to charity on a weekly basis.

Jana has not been seeing Jed since they broke up.

-Future perfect tense indicates that something in the future occurs before something else in the future. Future perfect tense is formed by EITHER using “will have” + past participle form OR using present tense “to be” + “going to have” + the past participle.

Example: Patricia will have set up the stage by the time we get there.

The antiques shop is going to have acquired several pieces at the auction.

I am going to have called the phone company before you get here.

-Future perfect progressive indicates that something will be happening up to a particular point in time in the future. Future perfect continuous is formed EITHER by using “will have been” + the present participle OR by using present tense “to be” + “going to have been” + the present participle.

Example: You will have been waiting for hours when the train arrives.

He is going to have been living in Malta for three days when his wife arrives.

I will not have been studying here that long.

Use the chart below as a quick reference for verb forms:

PAST tenses	<u>Simple past</u> Past <i>I played checkers.</i>	<u>Past Progressive</u> Past tense “to be” + present participle <i>I was playing checkers.</i>	<u>Past Perfect</u> “Had” + past participle <i>I had played checkers.</i>	<u>Past Perfect Progressive</u> “Had Been” + present participle <i>I had been playing checkers.</i>
PRESENT tenses	<u>Simple present</u> Present <i>I play checkers</i>	<u>Present Progressive</u> Present tense “to be” + present participle <i>I am playing checkers.</i>	<u>Present Perfect</u> Present “to have” + past participle <i>I have played checkers.</i>	<u>Present Perfect Progressive</u> Present tense “to have” + “been” + present participle <i>I have been playing checkers.</i>
FUTURE tenses	<u>Simple future</u> “Will” + present OR present tense “to be” + “going to” + verb <i>I will play checkers. I am going to play checkers.</i>	<u>Future Progressive</u> “will be” + present participle OR present tense “to be” + “going to be” + present participle <i>I will be playing checkers. I am going to be playing checkers.</i>	<u>Future Perfect</u> “will have” + past participle OR present tense “to be” + “going to have” + past participle <i>I will have played checkers. I am going to have played checkers.</i>	<u>Future Perfect Progressive</u> “will have been” + present participle OR present “to be” + “going to have been” + present participle <i>I will have been playing checkers. I am going to have been playing checkers.</i>

Verb Voice

Verb voice indicates who is performing the action of the verb. *Active voice* indicates that the subject is performing the action of the verb.

Example: Dr. Walter sent us an email about the homework.

The subject of this sentence “Dr. Walter” is performing the verb “sending.”

Passive voice indicates that the subject was not performing the action. In passive voice, the object of the action has become the subject of the sentence. Passive voice is formed by adding a “to be” verb to the past participle.

Example: The homework was sent to us.

The subject of this sentence “the homework” did not perform the verb – it did not do the sending. It was the object of the verb.

We use active voice when we want to emphasize the performer of the verb. We use passive voice when we want to emphasize the action itself over the actor or the recipient.

The pitcher slapped the batter. *Here, the pitcher is the most important part of the sentence.*

The batter was slapped. *Here, we don’t know who performed the slapping. The receiver of the action – the batter – is emphasized.*

In some cases, the actor of the verb will be attached to the end of the sentence:

The batter was slapped by the pitcher. *The batter is still the subject, but the performer of the verb (the pitcher) has been added to give more information.*

Passive voice must be used with caution. It is not incorrect, but, because it hides the actor of the sentence, it often makes writing weaker. Passive voice is best used to hide the actor or emphasize the recipient of the action. Note the difference in these sentences:

We were saved by the Coast Guard. *(The emphasis here is on “we” – the recipients of the saving).*

The Coast Guard has saved us. *(The emphasis here is on the Coast Guard – the subject performed the verb of saving.)*

Verb Mood

There are three verb moods: indicative, imperative, and subjunctive. Most of the time, we use verbs in the indicative mood – the moods that indicates the verb is acting or being:

Example: We played cricket all night.

Chris is a cashier at the liquor store.

I changed the oil in my car.

Verbs in the imperative mood indicate the giving of a command.

Example: Call the doctor!

Please pass the peas and carrots.

Get your hair cut, punk.

Verbs in the *subjunctive mood* express something that might be. A subjunctive verb can indicate a hypothetical situation, a desire, a reality that is not fact, or a demand.⁴

Hypothetical: If Charlie were to get a kidney infection, we would go to the hospital.

Desire: I wish I were an Oscar Meyer wiener.

A reality that is not fact: If I were the president, I would have health care fixed already.

Suggestion: You should keep your hands on the steering wheel.

Demand: Dr. Meyer insisted that Emily marry him.

NOTE: These verb conjugations don't follow normal tense rules. There are two exceptions that subjunctive verbs encounter:

1. In the present tense, drop the "s" from the third person.
2. In past tense, "was" always becomes "were".

Examples:

Incorrect: If Amy was not so punctual, we would be late.

Correct: If Amy were not so punctual, we would be late.

Incorrect: Abbi's mom insisted that she takes extra time with the baby.

Correct: Abbi's mom insisted that she take extra time with the baby.

Verb Errors

If a sentence begins using a certain set of verb forms, it must use those forms throughout the entire sentence. It cannot shift in the middle of the sentence:

1. The sentence needs to maintain a single PERSON and NUMBER:

Incorrect: Nurses get less pay than doctors, even though a nurse works just as hard.

Correct: Nurses get less pay than doctors, even though nurses work just as hard.

Incorrect: I have difficulty seeing another person's position, especially if they contradict my opinion. (*singular has become plural*)

Incorrect: I have difficulty seeing another person's position, especially if their opinion contradicts mine. (*singular has become plural*)

Correct: I have difficulty seeing other people's positions, especially if their opinions contract mine.

2. The sentence needs to maintain a single VERB TENSE:

Incorrect: Germany produces most of the world's oil, but England produced most of the corn.

Correct: Germany produces most of the world's oil, but England produces most of the corn.

⁴ Adapted from the Quality Writing Center at UofA and from Ann Bakto's *When Bad Grammar Happens to Good People*

3. The sentence needs to maintain a single VOICE:

Incorrect: The referee approached me, and I was asked to leave the game.

Correct: The referee approached me and asked me to leave the game.

Correct: I was approached and asked to leave the game by the referee.

4. The sentence needs to maintain a single VERB MOOD:

Incorrect: Keep your hands on the wheel, and you should check your rearview mirror.

(*imperative has become subjunctive*)

Correct: Keep your hands on the wheel and check your rearview mirror.

Correct: You should keep your hands on the wheel and should check your rearview mirror.

Verbals

Verbals are words derived from verbs that act as nouns, adverbs, or adjectives in a sentence. There are three types of verbals: *infinitives*, *participles*, and *gerunds*.

→ Infinitives

Infinitive phrases consist of an infinitive (a verb form before conjugation: to dance, to fly, to circumnavigate, etc.) plus an object. They are usually used as nouns, but they can also be used as adjectives or as adverbs.

As noun (subject): To understand Greek verbs would make me so happy.

As noun (object): Charlotte wanted desperately to make Letticia understand.

As adjective: Adree had nothing to satisfy the baby's screams.

As adverb: To promote world peace, she was willing to travel to the ends of the earth.

→ Participles

Participles are adjectives formed from verbs. They come in two tenses: present and past.

Present participle verbs take the present participle form; past participle verbs take the past participle forms.

Participles can be used as adjectives all by themselves:

Example: *howling* wolves

hovering aircraft

broken heart

rejected suitor

Participial phrases consist of a participle plus an object. They are used as adjectives.

Example: The creature *suffering in the dungeon* was once beautiful.

Surprised by the intensity of her disgust, Felicity stared at the cockroach *scurrying across her omelet*.

Irving, screaming like a banshee, went *careening from the room*.

→ Gerunds

Gerunds are verbs in the present participle form that are acting as nouns. Gerunds will always have the -ing ending.

Example: *Swimming* is an excellent form of exercise.

Melting candles for their wax produces a lovely scent.

Gerund phrases begin with a gerund (an -ing word which looks exactly like a present participle, but which is used as a noun.) A gerund phrase can be used in any way a noun can:

As subject: *Playing canasta* has been her downfall.

As direct object: He loves *embarrassing his relations*.

As subjective complement: One of his milder vices is *carousing until dawn*.

As object of preposition: She amused herself with *bungee-jumping from helicopters*.