

THE USE OF TENSES IN ENGLISH

A NEW APPROACH
FOR INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS

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THIS book, which is based on a series of lectures given recently at the University of Athens, deals solely with the grammar that governs the use of tenses in English. It has been written in simple language but in much greater detail than is usually found because I have long felt that there is a need for such a book among foreign students of the English language.

Emphasis has been laid on the strict rules of tense usage because the foreign student will find it much easier to master tense difficulties if he begins by working to strict rules than if, before having gained a mastery of the language, he experiments with elasticity that is correct in some circumstances but incorrect in most.

In many of the rules and explanations, a new terminology will be found: "Perfect" and "Ordinary" periods, "Finished" and "Unfinished" uses of the Perfect Tenses, and so on. Such terminology is necessarily new because, as far as I know, the parts which contain it have not been approached in this way before.

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PART ONE

TENSE FORMS

CONSTRUCTION OF TENSE FORMS

§ 1. There are 32 different tense forms in English which must be learned and remembered.

Study the table in Appendix II and recognise:

- (i) that all the Active Continuous forms, both Ordinary and Perfect, have some tense of the verb "to be" in front of a present participle,
- (ii) that the Perfect Non-continuous forms have some tense of the verb "to have" in front of a past participle, and
- (iii) that all Passive forms, Non-continuous and Continuous, Ordinary and Perfect, have some tense of the verb "to be" in front of a past participle.

Now study the table again together with the following more detailed rules of tense-form construction:

§ 2. The Ordinary Non-continuous Active Tenses (1, 3, 5, 7)—often known as the Simple Present, the Simple Future, the Simple Past, and the Conditional—are the Basic Tenses.

e.g. I teach, lead, offer, etc.

I shall teach, shall lead, shall offer, etc.

I taught, led, offered, etc.

I should teach, should lead, should offer, etc.

§ 3. The Ordinary Non-continuous Passive Tenses (2, 4, 6, 8) are constructed with the Basic Tenses of the

verb "to be" and the past participle of the verb we want to use.

e.g. I am
I shall be
I was
I should be } taught, led, offered, etc.

§ 4. The Ordinary Continuous Active Tenses (9, 11, 13, 15) are constructed with the Basic Tenses of the verb "to be" and the present participle of the verb we want to use.

e.g. I am
I shall be
I was
I should be } teaching, leading, offering, etc.

§ 5. The Ordinary Continuous Passive Tenses (10, 12, 14, 16) are constructed with the Ordinary Continuous Tenses of the verb "to be" and the past participle of the verb we want to use.

e.g. I am being
I shall be being
I was being
I should be being } taught, led, offered, etc.

§ 6. The Perfect Non-continuous Active Tenses (17, 19, 21, 23) are constructed with the Basic Tenses of the verb "to have" and the past participle of the verb we want to use.

e.g. I have
I shall have
I had
I should have } taught, led, offered, etc.

§ 7. The Perfect Non-continuous Passive Tenses (18, 20, 22, 24) are constructed with the Perfect Non-

continuous Tenses of the verb "to be" and the past participle of the verb we want to use.

e.g. I have been
I shall have been
I had been
I should have been

} taught, led, offered, etc.

§ 8. The Perfect Continuous Active Tenses (25, 27, 29, 31) are constructed with the Perfect **Non**-continuous Tenses of the verb "to be" and the present participle of the verb we want to use.

e.g. I have been
I shall have been
I had been
I should have been

} teaching, leading, offering,
etc.

§ 9. The Perfect Continuous Passive Tenses (26, 28, 30, 32) are constructed with the Perfect Continuous Tenses of the verb "to be" and the past participle of the verb we want to use. (These tenses, however, are rarely used.)

e.g. I have been being
I shall have been being
I had been being
I should have been being

} taught, led, offered,
etc.

NOTE: If it is found difficult to remember these construction rules, the tense forms themselves should be learned by heart.

PRACTICE EXERCISE 1

Without referring either to the construction rules or to the chart of tense forms, construct the following tenses of the verb "to question" in the first person singular.

1. The Past Perfect Non-continuous Active.
2. The Present Ordinary Continuous Active.
3. The Conditional Perfect Non-continuous Passive.
4. The Future Ordinary Continuous Active.
5. The Past Ordinary Continuous Active.
6. The Conditional Ordinary Non-continuous Passive.
7. The Present Perfect Non-continuous Passive.
8. The Past Ordinary Continuous Passive.
9. The Conditional Perfect Non-continuous Active.
10. The Past Perfect Non-continuous Passive.
11. The Future Perfect Non-continuous Active.
12. The Future Ordinary Continuous Passive.
13. The Present Ordinary Non-continuous Active.
14. The Conditional Ordinary Continuous Active.
15. The Present Perfect Continuous Passive.

Answers on page 132.

INFINITIVE FORMS

In the study of the use of tenses, a knowledge of the various infinitives is essential. There are eight:

	ACTIVE		PASSIVE	
	<i>Non-Continuous</i>	<i>Continuous</i>	<i>Non-Continuous</i>	<i>Continuous</i>
ORDINARY INFINITIVES	To teach	To be teaching	To be taught	To be being taught
PERFECT INFINITIVES	To have taught	To have been teaching	To have been taught	To have been being taught (rarely used)

SUBJUNCTIVE FORMS

Subjunctive forms **different** from their indicative counterparts appear only:

- (i) in the Present Ordinary Tense of the verb “to be”, where the word “be” is used in all persons—
I be, you be, he be, we be, you be, they be;
- (ii) in the 1st and 3rd persons singular of the Past Ordinary Tense of the verb “to be”, where the word “were” is used instead of “was”—
I were; he, she, it were;
- (iii) in the 1st and 3rd persons singular of the Past Ordinary Continuous Tense of other verbs, where “were” is again used instead of “was”—
I were teaching, he were teaching, etc.;
- (iv) in the Present Ordinary Non-continuous Tense of all finite verbs, where the 3rd person singular is uninflected—
He teach, he lead, he offer, etc.

NOTE: Forms (i) and (iv) are rarely used today.

PART TWO

THE USE OF TENSES

For the sake of brevity and clarity, the majority of the explanations and rules which now follow have been phrased in relation to **Actions**:

- e.g. He *went* there yesterday;
i.e. an action in the past.
She *comes* here every day;
i.e. an action in the present.

However, the explanations and rules apply equally to **States**, unless otherwise stated:

- e.g. He *was* there yesterday.
She *is* here every day.

THE PRESENT ORDINARY TENSES

NON-CONTINUOUS AND CONTINUOUS, ACTIVE AND PASSIVE

- | | |
|----------------|----------------------|
| “He teaches” | “He is teaching” |
| “He is taught” | “He is being taught” |

A. THE PRESENT ORDINARY NON-CONTINUOUS (OFTEN CALLED THE SIMPLE PRESENT)

§ 10. This Non-continuous Tense is used mainly for repeated actions; that is to say, actions that happen

every day, every week, every now and then, from time to time, and so on.

e.g. He *comes* to my office every Monday.

Dorothy and Warren usually *go* out of town on Sundays.

That girl *smokes* too much.

The tense is also used :

§ 11. to express facts that are always true, and facts that are true at the moment of speaking;

e.g. The earth *goes* round the sun.

He *behaves* rather stupidly, but he will grow out of it one day.

§ 12. to express customs, habits, and ability;

e.g. Men *precede* women when going downstairs.

Betty always *has* a glass of milk at 11 a.m.

That fellow *speaks* English as well as he *speaks* his own language.

§ 13. to replace the Future Tense after "if" ("unless", "in case", etc.) in Conditions of Future Probability and in Statements of Cause and Effect;

e.g. If the weather *is* fine tomorrow, we shall have a picnic.

(Not: if the weather will be fine, etc.)

If you *swallow* prussic acid, you die.

(Not: if you will swallow, etc.)

§ 14. to replace the Future Tense after "when", "whenever", "until", "till", "as soon as", "as", "directly", "immediately", "before", "while", "after", "as long as", etc., in subordinate adverbial clauses of time;

- e.g. Let's wait until he *comes*.
(Not: until he will come.)
As soon as he *arrives*, you can leave.
(Not: as soon as he will arrive, etc.)

§ 15. to express a future action in a categorical manner.
e.g. I *leave* by the 6.35 train this evening.

NOTE: Although the Historic Present exists in English it should be avoided until the student gains sufficient mastery of the language to be able to decide by ear when it can, and when it should not, be used.

B. THE PRESENT ORDINARY CONTINUOUS (OFTEN CALLED THE CONTINUOUS PRESENT)

§ 16. This tense is used to express actions that are happening at the moment of speaking. It is usually associated with the adverb "now", or its extensions: "today", "this week", "this term", "this year", etc.

- e.g. They have just telephoned to say that he *is coming* to the office now.
Mary *is spending* her holiday in Corfu this summer.
He *is writing* a letter at the moment, I believe.
She *is looking forward* to her birthday.
I *am examining* all the third-year students this week.

§ 17. The tense is also used to express a future action that is considered definite (but not so definite as that which is expressed categorically with the non-continuous form).

- e.g. I *am leaving* by the 6.35 train this evening.

§ 18. Most verbs in English have continuous forms, but there are some that have not. With these, the non-continuous forms must be used irrespective of rules that call for the continuous.

VERBS WITHOUT CONTINUOUS FORMS

§ 19. The verb "to be" when it expresses a state.

e.g. I *am* happy that you are well again.

She *was* once the wife of a famous surgeon.

He *is* very witty.

That *is* a naughty child.

Sometimes we find such sentences as "He *is being* very witty" or "That child *is being* naughty"—with the verb "to be" in a continuous form. These are not exceptions, however, because the verb here is not being used to express **states** of wittiness or naughtiness: it is being used to express **actions**: that is to say, he is speaking in a witty manner, the child is behaving naughtily.

The verb "to be" has continuous forms, too, when it is used to construct the Continuous Passive Tenses of other verbs.

e.g. The child *is being washed*.

His company's books *are being audited*.

§ 20. Verbs of "Perception".

Certain involuntary actions that concern our senses may be called facts of "perception". If, for example, our eyes are open, we see what is in front of us whether we want to see it or not. If we are not deaf, we hear the noises around us whether we want to or not. These are **involuntary** actions and the verbs that express them (i.e. *see* and *hear*) have no continuous forms. **Voluntary** actions, however, that concern the same senses (i.e. *look* and *listen*) have the usual continuous forms.

Picture a man and his wife sitting at a table in a

restaurant. At the next table, opposite the husband, there is a very pretty girl. The wife jealously rebukes her husband for looking at the pretty girl. The husband may reply: "My dear, I *see* that girl because she is in front of me. What else can I do? But I *am not looking* at her as you seem to think."

He cannot possibly say: "I *am seeing* that girl . . ." for "I *am not seeing* her as you seem to think."

In another example, imagine that you have just turned on the radio; you are waiting for a concert to begin. At the moment, a very dull man is talking about the effect of a new insecticide on beetles. You hear his voice—because the radio is on and you are not deaf; but are you listening to him? Probably not.

In these two examples, all the four verbs—*see*, *look*, *hear*, *listen*—are expressing actions that are happening at the moment of speaking, and therefore appear to require the Present Ordinary Continuous Tense. But *see* and *hear* are involuntary; they deal with matters of the senses—the perception, and therefore must remain in the non-continuous; *look* and *listen*, on the other hand, deal with voluntary actions—actions which you can do or not as you please, and therefore must be put into the continuous form.

EXCEPTIONS:

Sometimes *see* and *hear* have meanings which do not concern the senses; a common example is when they are used in the meanings "to interview" and "to give an audition to". Here they are clearly not verbs of perception, and so they can have the continuous forms in the normal way.

e.g. The producer is very busy now. He *is seeing* someone who wants a part in the play.

(i.e. he is interviewing someone, etc.)

The leader of the orchestra is busy, too. He *is hearing* a pianist who has come from the Conservatoire

(i.e. he is giving an audition to someone who has come, etc.)

“To see somebody home” is often used in the meaning “to take or escort somebody home”. Here, again, the verb “to see” has continuous forms because, clearly, it is not now a verb of perception.

e.g. “Where were you at ten-thirty last night?”

“At ten-thirty? Oh, yes! I *was seeing* Patricia home.”

For the senses of sight and hearing, then, we use *see* and *hear* in cases of involuntary perception, and *look* and *listen* (among others) in cases of voluntary action. But what about the other senses—smell, taste, and touch?

For these senses, we have the verbs *smell*, *taste*, and *feel** in cases **both** of involuntary perception and voluntary action. It is easy, however, to distinguish when they have and when they have not continuous forms: they have not continuous forms when they are used for involuntary perception; they have continuous forms when they are used for voluntary actions.

e.g. “What are you doing?”

“*I am smelling* these new perfumes and trying to decide which to buy.”

“*I am tasting* this soup to see whether there is sufficient salt in it.”

“*I am feeling* this material to see whether it is pure silk or not.”

(These are voluntary actions and therefore,

* Somewhat curiously, the verb “touch” is never a verb of perception.