

Tense Confusion: Simple Past Versus Past Perfect

Introduction

The perfect tenses – those formed by the conjugated auxiliary verb *have* + the past participle of the main verb – are often confused with other tenses by English as a second language learners. One common verb-choice error is choosing the past perfect when the simple past is the correct form.

(a) I **signed** my new apartment lease yesterday. (simple past) ✓

(b) I **had signed** my new apartment lease yesterday. (past perfect) ✗

Sentences (a) and (b) both indicate that my apartment lease was signed yesterday (a completed action), yet only one is incorrect. Why?

The simple past: Actions completed at a known time in the past

A simple past verb generally refers to an action completed *at a known time in the past*. In other words, if your sentence indicates a time, then you use the simple past. Hence, I **signed** my new apartment lease **yesterday**.

Sometimes, the time an action is completed can be found in one of the previous sentences:

*Yesterday morning was busy. I **attended** my usual economics class. Then, instead of walking home, I **had** coffee with a friend and **copied** my essay in the library. Luckily, I **had** enough time to sign my new apartment lease.*

The time *yesterday morning* found in the first sentence carries through the following sentences. The reader understands that all the actions described in the three sentences happened *yesterday morning*.

The Past Perfect: Ordering past time

The perfect tenses are retrospective; in other words, they refer to actions that occurred before another time. The past perfect indicates a *completed past action that occurred before another moment or action in the past*, so two past times, either explicit or inferred, are required to correctly use the past perfect. Its use is one way to order past actions. Here are some examples:

*I **had signed** my new Lennoxville apartment lease **by August**. (In this sentence, there is a time in the past, *by August*, and an action, *had signed*. The past perfect action, **had signed**, occurred **before** the time in the past, **August**.)*

*I **missed** the lecture because I **had forgotten** about it. (In this sentence, two actions occurred: *missed* and *had forgotten*. The past perfect action, **had forgotten**, occurred **before** the simple past action, **missed**.)*

Last semester, the rock music course was full, so I **was** happy that I **had pre-registered** for it. (In this sentence, there is a time in the past, *last semester*, and an action, *had pre-registered*. The past perfect action, **had pre-registered**, occurred **before** the time in the past, **last semester**.)

The past perfect can also be used to describe various actions that led to another past verb:

In **2020**, the ruling party of Camelot felt confident they would be re-elected. They **had made** all aspects of health care completely free, they **had guaranteed** a living wage for all citizens, they **had negotiated** peace on earth, and they **had kept** taxes low. (In these sentences, the ruling party felt confident in 2020. Why? All of the policies - expressed using the past perfect - had been instituted **before** 2020, a time in the past.)

Is the past perfect required to order past time?

1. The adverbials *before* and *after* can be used without the past perfect to order past time. Compare the following pairs of sentences:

- i. Linda **lied** to her friends before she **had considered** the consequences of her actions.
- ii. Linda **lied** to her friends before she **considered** the consequences of her actions.
- iii. Laura **considered** the consequences of her actions after she **had lied** to her friends.
- iv. Laura **considered** the consequences of her actions after she **lied** to her friends.

All four of the above sentences are grammatically correct and have the same meaning. However, sentences (ii) and (iv) show that the order of events is perfectly clear *without* the use of the past perfect when using *before* and *after*.

2. The use of the past perfect is not required when the order of two past events is clear using only the simple past.

France **worked** on her thesis research project for two years and **thereby earned** her Master's degree. (In this sentence, France clearly worked on her project to earn her degree, so the use of the past perfect *had worked* is not necessary.)

Takeaways

1. The past perfect is used to denote that an action occurred before a particular moment or action in the past. It is a way to order past time.
2. If the order of past events is clear without using the past perfect, use the simple past.
3. If in doubt, use the simple past. You need a reason to use the past perfect.

