

Tense Confusion: Simple Present Versus Present Progressive

Introduction

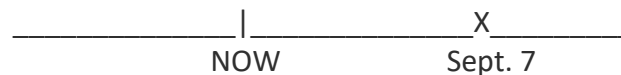
English second language learners are often confused by the usage of the simple present and present progressive (also called the present continuous) tenses. One would expect the simple present tense to be used for actions occurring in the present when, in fact, it is the present progressive that fills this role. This handout will help to demystify the usage of these tenses.

The simple present: Facts and habits

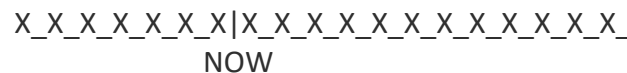
The simple present is formed by conjugating the main verb (e.g., I, you, we and they **walk**; he, she, and it **walks**.). It does not employ an auxiliary verb.

- a. The simple present is used for facts and habitual actions. On a timeline, simple present actions are seen as points in time. (Keywords – adverbs of frequency: e.g., *always*, *sometimes*, *rarely*, *never*)

*Fall session **starts** on September 7th. (a fact)*



*Water **freezes** at 0 degrees Centigrade. (always true)*



*Every morning, I **stop** at the café for a quick bite. (a morning habit)*



- b. The simple present is used with all verbs, both action and stative*.

*Thomas **runs** every morning at 6 a.m. (action verb)*

*He **feels** great after a run. (stative* verb)*

- c. Because the simple present is used for facts and habits, it represents permanent situations.

*Sherbrooke **is** a city in Quebec. (This situation is not expected to change.)*

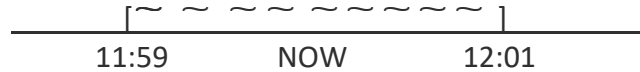
*Megan **works** at Bishop's University. (We expect her to continue working there.)*

The present progressive: Actions in progress now

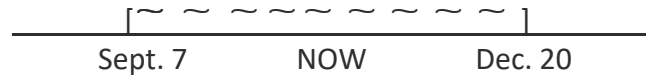
The present progressive is formed by using the verb *be* conjugated in the present + *verbing* (e.g., writing, sleeping, swimming).

- a. The present progressive is used for actions in progress now/in the present. On a timeline, present progressive actions are seen as periods of time. (Keywords: *today, now, nowadays, at the moment, at this time, this day, this week, this month, etc.*)

The period of time may be short: *I **am sending** a text I to my friend now.*



The period of time may be long: *Cathy **is studying** at Bishop's this fall session.*



Whether the period of time is short or long, every present progressive action has a start point *before now* and a projected end point *after now*.

- b. The present progressive can only be used with action verbs.

*Thomas **is running** right now.* (action verb)

*He **is feeling** great! → He **feels** great!* (*Feel* is a stative* verb and should not be used in progressive forms. The simple present is used for states occurring in the present.)

- c. Because a present progressive action is seen as a period of time, it represents temporary situations.

*Anthony **is writing** his exam now.* (He will complete the exam in an hour or so.)

*Laurie **is working** at Bishop's University this summer.* (This is a temporary summer job.)

*What is a stative verb?

A stative verb is timeless; in other words, it can be seen as permanent or unchangeable. Therefore, a disconnect may occur between the temporary aspect of the present progressive and the permanent nature of a stative verb. Stative verbs are, thus, not generally used in progressive forms. (Exceptions do occur.) Here are a few categories and examples of stative verbs: the verb *be*, senses (e.g., *see, taste, feel*), mental perception (e.g., *know, understand*), ownership (e.g., *own, possess*), and emotions (e.g., *love, want*).

Memorizing a list of stative verbs is not enough for correct usage; one has to understand a verb's sense in a sentence as some verbs have both active and stative meanings:

*Rita **is tasting** the soup, and the soup **tastes** good.* (The first verb, *is tasting*, describes the action of Rita placing the soup in her mouth. The second verb, *tastes*, describes the delicious quality/state of the soup.)

Stative verb reference:

Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL course* (2nd ed.). Heinle & Heinle. (pp.120-122)

