

## 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.

