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 to my friend now.*

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
11:59 & \text{NOW} & 12:01
\end{array}
\]

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

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{Sept. 7} & \text{NOW} & \text{Dec. 20}
\end{array}
\]

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:*