

Tense Confusion: Simple Past Versus Present 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. Choosing between the present perfect and the simple past can be particularly difficult.

Compare the following sentences:

- (a) I handed in my essay yesterday. (simple past)
- (b) I have handed in my essay. (present perfect)

Sentences (a) and (b) both indicate that my essay is in the hands of my professor (a completed action), yet one is written in the present time frame and the other in the past time frame. Why? Moreover, why would one form be used rather than the other?

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 handed in my essay 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 bring my essay to my professor.

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 present perfect: Actions completed *before now*

The perfect tenses are retrospective. To understand the present perfect, imagine yourself standing in the present and looking backwards to actions that occurred *before now*. Compared to the simple past, the actual time that present perfect actions take place is irrelevant or unimportant: the time can be close to the present or far in the past. This can be a difficult distinction to make. Here are some examples:

My prof has written a novel about the heroes of ancient Greece. (The reader does not know when the professor wrote the book – it could have been last year or 20 years ago. The important fact is that they actually wrote a book.)

*I have handed in my essay. (The idea that the professor has received my essay is more important than *when* I handed in the essay. The reader knows that the paper was delivered *before now*.)*

Julie has recently received her acceptance letter. (Some adverbs, such as *just*, *already*, and *recently*, add extra meaning to the present perfect main verb. In this example, the adverb *recently* indicates that the letter was received relatively close to the present. We still do not know the exact time.)

The simple past versus the present perfect: Actions with duration

The simple past is used to indicate that an action with duration was completed in the past. In this case, the specific time is not required. This use requires a prepositional phase introduced by the preposition *for*:

I studied at Bishop's for two years. (I do not study at Bishop's anymore, and the reader does not know when I studied there.)

The present perfect is used to indicate that an action with duration started *before now* and continues through the present – an incomplete action. This use requires a prepositional phase introduced by the prepositions *for* or *since*. In both of the following sentences, I started studying at Bishop's in 2021, and I still study there:

I have studied at Bishop's for two years. (*For* is used with a period of time.)
I have studied at Bishop's since 2021. (It is 2023. *Since* is used with a point in time.)

The simple past versus the present perfect: Repeated actions

The simple past and present perfect are also used to indicate repeated past actions. When the simple past is used, the reader can assume that the actions have no possibility of repeating:

Marie painted many landscapes in her introductory art class. (The art class is over, so Marie will no longer be painting in this particular course.)

When the present perfect is used, there is a possibility that the action will be repeated:

Marie has painted many landscapes in her introductory art class. (The art class is in progress, so Marie may paint more landscapes there.)

Takeaways

1. If you know the time that an action occurred, even if that time is implied, use the simple past.
2. If you do not know when a past action occurred, or if the time it occurred is unimportant, use the present perfect.
3. If an action with duration is completed, use the simple past.
4. If an action with duration started in the past and continues in the present, use the present perfect.
5. If a repeated action has no chance of repeating, use simple past.
6. If a repeated action has a chance of repeating, use present perfect.
7. If in doubt, use the simple past. You need a reason to use the present perfect.

