English Verb Tenses

English has twelve main verb tenses that describe when actions take place, sometimes in relation to other points in time. Some tenses are more common than others, but it’s good to have a solid understanding of when to use each tense because using the wrong tense can change the meaning of a sentence or decrease comprehensibility. If you have trouble deciding which tense to use, look at the overall context of the clause and for clues such as time words. Here are some visualizations of the tenses and some examples of their common usages.

Simple Present

- Facts:
  Ex. They are students.
- Repeated actions:
  Ex. I wake up at 7 o’clock every day.

Present Continuous

- Actions in progress right now
  Ex. I am reading; don’t disturb me.
- Intentions or plans:
  Ex. We are going to the movies tonight.

Present Perfect

- Past actions with the result in the present
  Ex. I have lost my keys; I can’t find them.
- Actions started and not finished
  Ex. He has lived here for many years.
- Experiences (had or not)
  Ex. I have never been to Europe.

Present Perfect Continuous

- Recent continued actions relevant to the present
  Ex. We have been studying since this morning.
Simple Past
- Finished actions in the past
  Ex. I *visited* my family last week.

Past Continuous
- Actions in progress in the past
  Ex. They *were sleeping* when the earthquake happened.

Past Perfect
- Actions finished before another point in the past
  Ex. She *had wanted* to be a doctor, but changed her mind.

Past Perfect Continuous
- Continuous actions before another point in the past
  Ex. I *had been running* every day before my injury.

Simple Future
- Actions that will be completed in the future
  Ex. We *will travel* to France this summer.

Future Continuous
- Actions that will be in progress in the future
  Ex. I *will be applying* to grad school this fall.

Future Perfect
- Actions finished before another point in the future
  Ex. I *will have finished* my research by the time I graduate.

Future Perfect Continuous
- Continuous actions before another point in the future
  Ex. In May we *will have been living* here for 15 years.
Conditional Verb Tenses

Conditional tenses talk about hypothetical situations. There are five main types of conditional sentences, all of which use an “if” clause:

**Type Zero: Real condition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>If clause verb tense</th>
<th>Main clause verb tense</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General truths</td>
<td>Simple present</td>
<td>Simple present</td>
<td>If this thing happens, this thing happens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If it rains, the roads are more dangerous.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Type 1: Unreal (present/future), but likely**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>If clause verb tense</th>
<th>Main clause verb tense</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A possible condition</td>
<td>Simple present</td>
<td>Simple future</td>
<td>If this thing happens, this thing will happen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and its probable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If you work hard, you will succeed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>results</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Type 2: Unreal and unlikely**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>If clause verb tense</th>
<th>Main clause verb tense</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A hypothetical</td>
<td>Simple past</td>
<td>Present conditional1/</td>
<td>If this thing happened, this thing would</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>condition and its</td>
<td></td>
<td>Present continuous</td>
<td>happen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>probable result</td>
<td></td>
<td>conditional</td>
<td>If she wore glasses, she would see more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>clearly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Type 3: Unreal (past), but likely**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>If clause verb tense</th>
<th>Main clause verb tense</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An unreal past condition and its probable result in the past</td>
<td>Past perfect</td>
<td>Perfect conditional</td>
<td>If this thing had happened, this thing would have happened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If we had known, we would have come earlier.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mixed type**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>If clause verb tense</th>
<th>Main clause verb tense</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An unreal past condition and its probable result in the present</td>
<td>Past perfect</td>
<td>Present conditional</td>
<td>If this thing had happened, this thing would happen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If he had studied, he would know the answer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

1 Conditional tenses use “would,” which is a modal verb, meaning that after “would” you use the base form of the next verb (she would see, not she would sees)