

Past Perfect - Use

When do we use the past perfect tense in English?

Note: This is also called the **past perfect simple** tense.

We use the past perfect for:

1. Finished actions that happened before another past action

If we are talking about more than one event that happened in the past, we often use the past perfect for the earlier event (the thing that happened first).

For example:

- They **had eaten** before we arrived.
(They ate and then we arrived.)
- I felt better after I'**d taken** some paracetamol.
(I took some paracetamol and then I felt better.)
- I **had finished** my homework when Frank called.
- We saw Ethel on Saturday. We **had not seen** her for two years.
- They **hadn't understood** the rule until the teacher explained it.
- **Had** she **gone** to bed by the time you left?

We often use the past perfect to explain the cause of a past situation.

For example:

- She was upset because she **had lost** her passport.
- He **hadn't slept** all night, so he was tired.

We can often use the **past simple** instead if it is clear what happened first. We can do this, for example, if we use words like “before”, “after”, “until”, “because” or “so”.

Note: When either tense is possible, native speakers often choose the past perfect to emphasise the completion of the first action or state.

For example:

- They **ate** before we arrived.
- I felt better after I **took** some paracetamol.
- They **didn't understand** the rule until the teacher explained it.
- She was upset because she **lost** her wallet.
- He **didn't sleep** all night, so he was tired.

2. Finished actions before a specific time in the past

These are things that finished before a certain moment. Here there is only one action.

For example:

- I **had cleaned** the whole house before midday.
- By 2018, she'd **directed** three movies.
- At that point, we'd **already** made a decision.
- How many emails **had** you **answered** by lunchtime?

3. Life experiences before a point in the past

This is an extension of rules 1 & 2. These are experiences that happened before another action or moment in the past.

For example:

- Before I moved to Spain, I'd **lived** in two other Spanish-speaking countries.
- We **had visited** New York twice before 2022.
- The kids **had** never **seen** snow before that.
- **Had** you ever **been** to Canada before then?

4. Unfinished actions in the past

These are things that started in the past, and then continued up to another action or moment in the past. The action possibly stopped then or continued afterwards.

Note: For dynamic (action) verbs, we often use the past perfect continuous.

For example:

- I **had known** her for years when we started a business together.
(I knew her for years, we started a business, and I still knew her.)
- He'd **been** sick for several days before he decided to see a doctor.
(He was sick, he saw a doctor, and then was probably still sick for a little while.)
- By the end of March, he'd **lived** in Edinburgh for two years.
(He started living in Edinburgh two years before the end of March, and possibly still lived in Edinburgh after the end of March.)
- On 1 July 2024, I'd **worked** at the hospital for a year.
(I started my job at the hospital on 1 July 2023, was still working there on 1 July 2024, and possibly continued to work there afterwards.)

5. Narration (stories) to provide background

Writers often use the past perfect to describe things that happened before the main events.

For example:

- Jason looked exhausted. He **had worked** all night.
- Mary smiled. She **had** finally **found** the letter.

6. Unreal or hypothetical situations in the past

We use the past perfect in third conditional sentences (imagining a different past) and to express regret or wishes about the past.

For example:

- If Frank **had studied**, he would have passed his exam. (third conditional)
- I wish I **hadn't drunk** so much coffee.
- If only we **had known**.

Some time words and phrases that we often use with the past perfect:

- before
- after
- until
- when
- once
- as soon as
- by
- by the time
- already
- yet
- just
- never
- ever