

Past Simple - Use

When do we use the past simple tense in English?

We use the past simple for:

1. Finished actions in the past

These are actions that started and finished in the past. The time is mentioned or clearly understood.

For example:

- I **watched** a movie yesterday.
- The meeting **started** at 8 o'clock. (Here "start" is the action.)
- You **were** born in 1980.
- She **didn't visit** London last year.
- Shakespeare **wrote** Romeo and Juliet.
- The Titanic **sank** in the Atlantic Ocean.

2. Past states or situations

These are things that were true in the past, but are not true now.

For example:

- They **lived** in San Francisco in the 1960s.
- She **was** very shy as a child.
- When I **was** little, I **believed** in Santa Claus.
- John **had** a moustache three years ago.
- People **didn't travel** much in the past.
- Where did you **work** before?

3. Past habits or repeated actions

These are things that happened (or didn't happen) repeatedly in the past, but not now. We often use words and phrases like "always", "often", "usually", "every day", etc.

Note: The past simple in these sentences can often be replaced with "used to + base form" or "would + base form".

For example:

- He usually **worked** at a hotel in summer.
- We **walked** to school every day.
- I never **went** to the beach when I **was** a kid.

4. Narration (stories) or lists of events

These can be real or fictional.

Note: We also use other tenses for narration.

For example:

- I **walked** into the room, then everyone **stopped** and **looked** at me.
- Today Frank **got up** late, **played** video games, then **went** to a pub.
- Once upon a time, there **was** a king who **lived** in a small village.

5. Giving more information after the present perfect

If we introduce news with the present perfect, we then often use the past simple to give specific details.

For example:

- I've lost my phone. I **left** it on the bus this morning.
- She has met the new manager. She **spoke** to him after the meeting.
- Police have arrested two suspects. They **caught** them at the airport last night.

6. Unreal or hypothetical present or future situations

We use the past simple form in second conditional and past subjunctive sentences.

Note: These are not past simple sentences. They just use the past simple form.

For example:

- If Frank **studied**, he would pass his exam.
- I wish I **lived** at the beach.
- Imagine you **had** a lot of money.

Here are some time words and phrases that we often use with the past simple:

- yesterday
- last night / last week / last month / last year
- ago (e.g. two years ago)
- in 2004
- in the 1990s
- when (e.g. when I was young/little, when I lived in Sydney)
- as a kid/child
- once upon a time (common in fairytales)