

Present Perfect or Present Perfect Continuous - Comparison

What is the difference between the present perfect and present perfect continuous tenses in English?

Note: The **present perfect** is also called the **present perfect simple**, and the **present perfect continuous** is also called the **present perfect progressive**.

The present perfect and the present perfect continuous both connect the past with the present, but we cannot always use them interchangeably. Sometimes both tenses are possible and the meaning stays the same, sometimes both are possible but the meaning is different, and sometimes only one tense is possible.

As a general rule, we use the **present perfect** to emphasise a result, completion or experience. We use the **present perfect continuous** to emphasise an activity itself or how long it has lasted.

This table gives a summary of the main differences.

Present Perfect	Present Perfect Continuous
1. Usually used for finished actions <i>There is a focus on the completion.</i> • I've learnt* how to make bread. (I can now make bread.) • My parents have watched that series. (They have finished it.) • Frank has eaten the whole cake. • I've cleaned the kitchen, so now it's spotless. *UK: learnt; US: learned	Usually used for unfinished/ongoing actions <i>There is a focus on the activity and/or the duration.</i> • I've been learning how to make bread. (This is an ongoing process that will probably continue into the future.) • My parents have been watching that series. (They probably haven't finished it.) • Frank has been eating a lot of cake lately. • I've been cleaning the kitchen for two hours.

2. Can be used with “yet” and “already” • Have you emailed her yet? (You are asking about one action.) (Not: Have you been emailing her yet?) • He has done his homework already. (He has finished.) (Not: He has been doing his homework already.)	Cannot be used with “yet” and “already” • Have you been emailing her? (You are asking if this has happened more than once and if it is still happening.) • He has been doing his homework. (He may or may not have finished.)
3. Usually if we say how often, how many or how much <i>To talk about numbers or quantities, we usually use the present perfect. We use it for completed actions that are not part of a habit.</i> • I’ve been to China four times. (Not: I’ve been going to China four times.) • They’ve played tennis twice this month. (Not: They’ve been playing tennis twice this month.) • How much money have you spent today? (Not: How much money have you been spending today?) • How many books have you read this month? (completed books)	Sometimes if we say how often, how many or how much <i>We can use the present perfect continuous to talk about quantities and numbers if we are talking about habits, or ongoing repeated actions.</i> • I’ve been going to the gym four times a week. • They’ve been playing tennis twice a month. • How much money have you been spending on clothes lately? • How many books have you been reading this month? (if the person is reading several books at the same time)
4. Often preferred for longer, more permanent situations, especially unchanging states <i>But both tenses are possible here.</i> • The statue has stood in the square for decades. • She has run the family business since they opened their first shop. • I’ve lived in New York all my life.	Often preferred for short-term situations <i>But both tenses are possible here.</i> • Frank has been standing there for half an hour. • She has been running the family business since March this year. • I’ve been living in New York for three months.

5. Stative and dynamic verbs

With stative verbs, we can usually only use the present perfect.

- They've **known** Julie since July.
(Not: ~~They've been knowing...~~)
- I **haven't believed** in Santa Claus since I was seven.
(Not: ~~I haven't been believing...~~)
- How long **have** you **owned** this apartment?
(Not: ~~How long have you been owning...~~)

Both tenses are possible with dynamic verbs, but as shown in points above, the tense can change the meaning. Also, if we use "how long" with a dynamic verb, we usually need the present perfect continuous. This is especially true for short-term activities and situations.

- They've **been spending** time with Julie recently. (probably ongoing)
- They've **spent** time with Julie recently. (finished action)
- My kids **have been asking** me questions about Santa Claus. (probably ongoing)
- My kids **have asked** me questions about Santa Claus. (finished action)
- How long **have** you **been looking** for an apartment?
(Not: ~~How long have you looked for an apartment?~~)

! Although "mean" and "want" are stative verbs, we often use them in the present perfect continuous.

- I've **been meaning** to call you.
- He's **been wanting** to see that movie.

6. With some verbs, like "live", "work", "study" and "teach" there is no big difference.

Note: Although we can use both tenses interchangeably here, the present perfect is often used for longer and more permanent situations. See point 4.

- We've lived in this house for ten years.
- We've been living in this house for ten years.
- How long have you worked at this company?
- How long have you been working at this company?
- She's studied Japanese since 2018.
- She's been studying Japanese since 2018.

! We use the present perfect with "always".

- I've always lived in big cities.
(Not: ~~I've always been living...~~)

Note: There are some other uses of the present perfect and the present perfect continuous.

Full explanation of the present perfect: learnenglishgrammar.com/present-perfect-use/

Full explanation of the present perfect continuous: learnenglishgrammar.com/present-perfect-continuous-use/

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