

Present Perfect - Use

When do we use the present perfect tense in English?

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

As a general rule, we use the **present perfect** to talk about actions that happened or started in the past, but still have a connection with the present.

We use the present perfect for:

1. Life experiences at an unspecified time in the past

These are things that happened in the past, but we do not say exactly when they happened.

Words and phrases that are commonly used in these sentences: **before, never, ever, [number] times, so far**

For example:

- I've **been** to London before.
- They've never **eaten** at McDonald's.
- **Have** you ever **surfed**?
- Ethel **has seen** *The Sound of Music* ten times.

Difference between **been** and **gone**: www.learnenglishgrammar.com/been-and-gone/

2. Unfinished actions

These are things that started in the past and continue to the present. They are still true now.

Words and phrases that are commonly used in these sentences: **for, since, how long, all [period of time]**

For example:

- I **'ve lived** in this house for five years.
- They **'ve known** David since June last year.
- She **'s liked** peanut butter since she was a kid.
- **Have** you **been** here since 8am?
- How long **have** you **worked** here?
- We **'ve lived** in this town all our lives.
- Frank **has had** a headache all day.

3. Completed actions in an unfinished time period

These are things that happen in a period of time that is still current.

Words and phrases that are commonly used in these sentences: **today, this [period of time]**

For example:

- **Has** it **rained** today?
- I **'ve been** to the gym three times this week.
- Maria **hasn't seen** her family this year.

If you are speaking at the end of the time period, in other words when the time period has almost finished, you can also use the **past simple**.

For example:

- **Did** it **rain** today? (You could say this in the evening.)
- I **went** to the gym three times this week. (You could say this on Friday or the weekend.)
- Maria **didn't see** her family this year. (You could say this in November or December.)

We also usually use the **past simple** if the action is complete and is a single event (it probably will not happen again in this period).

For example:

- I **started** a new job this week.
- They **moved** to a new apartment this year.
- He **didn't wake up** early today.

We use the present perfect to say that something has not happened in a period of time that started at a point in the past and continues to the present.

For example:

- We **haven't seen** David since March. (The last time we saw David was in March.)
- I **haven't talked** to her for two weeks. (The last time I talked to her was two weeks ago.)
- She **hasn't played** piano in years. (The last time she played piano was years ago.)

4. Phrases with ordinal numbers + time

This is similar to rule 1 (life experiences). We use the present perfect after phrases like "it's the first time" to talk about how many times something has happened up to now.

These sentences always contain: **it/this/that is the [ordinal number] time (that)**

Note: We use the present simple (**is**) after **it/this/that**, but not after **time**.

For example:

- I'm feeling a little lonely. This is the first time that I've **lived** alone. (Not: ~~I live~~)
- It's the second time she's **called** me tonight. (Not: ~~she calls~~)
- That's the third time the team **has lost** this season. (Not: ~~the team loses~~)

1, 2, 3 and 4 apply to both British and American English.

*For 5 and 6, the **past simple** is often used instead of the present perfect in American English.*

5. Recent completed actions with a result on the present

These are things that happened in the recent past, but are still relevant or important now.

There are no commonly used words or phrases for these types of sentences. The context will indicate if you should use the present perfect.

For example:

- You've **cut** yourself badly. You should go to the hospital.
- I've **lost** my phone. Could I use yours to call my friend?
- Frank **has tidied** his room. Now you can actually see the floor.

It is common for North Americans to use the **past simple** in these situations, especially in spoken language. *For example:*

- You **cut** yourself badly. You should go to the hospital.
- I **lost** my phone. Could I use yours to call my friend?
- Frank **tidied** his room. Now you can actually see the floor.

6. Very recent completed actions

These are very recent things that may or may not be relevant now. These may be everyday events or things that you hear on the news.

Words that are commonly used in these sentences: **already, just, yet, recently, lately**

For example:

- We've already **watched** that series.
- Ethel **has** just **finished** her homework.
- Frank **hasn't started** his homework yet.
- **Have** you **spoken** to George yet?
- **Have** you **seen** them recently?
- The government **has announced** a new tax policy.
- Scientists **have discovered** a new species of octopus.

It is common for North Americans to use the **past simple** in these situations, especially in spoken language.

For example:

- We already **watched** that series.
- Ethel just **finished** her homework.
- Frank **didn't start** his homework yet.
- **Did** you **speak** to George yet?
- **Did** you **see** them recently?
- The government **announced** a new tax policy.
- Scientists **discovered** a new species of octopus.

Advanced grammar point

Sometimes we use the present perfect:

7. In sentences about the future after conjunctions like *when, after, once, until* and *as soon as*

Note: We do not use "will + verb" after these conjunctions.

It is usually possible to use the present simple instead of the present perfect in these types of sentences, but using the present perfect emphasises completion before the future action.

Compare:

- When you **arrive**, send me a message. (focus on arrival)
- When you **have arrived**, send me a message. (focus on completion of arrival)
- After I **read** the report, I'll have lunch. (focus on reading)
- After I **'ve read** the report, I'll have lunch. (focus on completion of reading)

More examples:

- Once you **'ve done** your homework, you can play video games.
- Let's wait until they **'ve left**.
- He'll call you as soon as he **'s finished** the inspection.