

Perfect Tenses

The 'perfect' verb tenses (past, present and future perfect) are used primarily when the time period over which an action was performed is indefinite. Perfect verb tenses can also be used to indicate sequential orders of events, particularly when one action was completed in reference to another action or event.

The formula: {to have} + participle (non-continuous verbs)

What makes a perfect tense past, present or future is the tense of {to have}

Identifying the Reference Point

Perfect tenses are used when there is an action that started at some undefined point in time and continued until 1) another undefined point in time, 2) the present, or 3) a specific point in time. The strongest determinant in the tense is the completion or reference point.

Find the reference point in these examples:

- Before she started college, Angela had competed in a lot of races.

The reference point, 'before she started college,' is in the past. Implied in the sentence is that the action, racing, ended in the past; we can assume that Angela no longer competes in races.

- Sean has traveled to Mexico several times.

The reference point is the present (implied). Sean traveled to Mexico in the past, but not at a specific time.

- Have you finished the book I lent you yet?

The reference point is in the present. The action either occurred in the past, or did not occur at all.

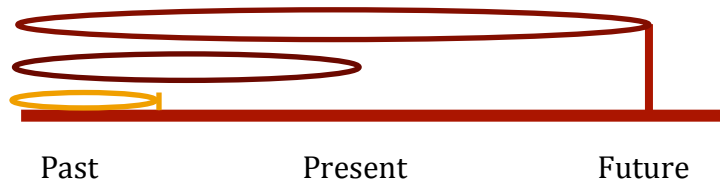
- It hasn't stopped raining yet.

The reference point is the present. The action began in the past and has continued to the present.

- By this time tomorrow, I will have finished writing this tutorial!

The reference point is in the future, 'this time tomorrow.' The action began at an unspecified time.

Now that you know how to find a reference point, you can figure out what tense to use. The verb/action may have occurred in the past, present or future, but always before the reference point. As you can see in the figure below, the time over which the action was performed can overlap between the tenses, but the reference point cannot. For example, the action/verb could have been performed in the past and still be suitable for past, present and future perfect tenses, but if the reference point is in the future, then you use the future perfect tense.



Some More Practice with Perfect Tenses

We can shift the tense by changing the reference point. For example, Angela competed in 15 races during high school.

- Past perfect: Before she started college, Angela had competed in a lot of races.
 - *Angela competed in races in the past, but not at a specific time (not “yesterday” or “last year”). The reference point, ‘before she started college’, is in the past. The action this refers to was completed in the past.*
- Present perfect: Angela has competed in a lot of races.
 - *The reference point is the present (implied/not given). The action began in the past and continued into the present.*
- Future perfect: When the season ends, Angela will have competed in many races.
 - *The reference point is in the future. The action began in the past (or even the present or future) and continues into the future.*

For the next example, Sean traveled to Mexico three times in the past, and is about to go there again next month.

- Past perfect: By age fifteen, Sean had traveled to Mexico twice.
 - *The action (two trips to Mexico) was completed in the past, but we don’t know the exact dates. Note that here it doesn’t matter that he is in Mexico currently or that he had a third trip somewhere in there.*
- Present perfect: Sean has traveled to Mexico several times.
 - *The action (multiple trips to Mexico) started in the past. The reference point (implied) is the present.*
- Future perfect: Counting his trip next month, Sean will have traveled to Mexico four times.
 - *The reference point is the future. While technically the action doesn’t have to have been completed in the past (all of the trips could be in the future), in this case the time spans from past to future.*

Getting Technical: Uses for the Perfect Tenses

1. Sequential action (completion). The action was completed before the reference point. The action could have been a single event or multiple events. This is a way to sequence events.
2. Duration (completion). The action began before the reference point and continued until the reference point. Time period is indefinite.
3. Unspecified time and duration (completion). The action occurred at an unspecified time before the present. If in the form of a question, the action may not have occurred at all.
4. An uncompleted action you expect to happen/complete. The action began at an unspecified time before the present, and is not completed yet.

Uses #1-2 are typical for the past and future perfect tenses. Uses #3-4 are typical for the present perfect tense.

Go through the examples above and determine which of these four uses applies to each example.

A final note about continuous/non-continuous verbs:

The past, present and future perfect tenses typically use “non-continuous” verbs. For continuous verbs, use the Past/Present/Future Perfect Continuous tense.

Sources and Further Reading/Practice:

- <http://www.perfect-english-grammar.com/present-perfect-use.html>
- <http://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/pastperfect.html>
- <http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/rules/pastperf.htm>