

Simple vs. Continuous Tense

Definition

Simple tense (ie. simple present tense) is used for things which are repeated, part of a routine, and/or permanent.

Continuous tense (ie. present progressive tense) is used for things which are temporary or may change.

When to use simple tense:

1. For stating facts.
 - Whales feed on phytoplankton.
2. For repeated, regular actions and habits.
 - I drink coffee every morning.
 - The train arrives at the station on the hour.
3. After conditional clauses (ie. *if, when, as soon as, until*, etc.) or situations.
 - We will wait for her *until* she comes.
 - What will you do *if* you fail your exams?
4. With stative verbs. **see below*

When to use continuous tense:

1. For something that is happening around the time of speaking.
 - We are waiting for the airplane.
 - The economy is adding new jobs every quarter.
 - I am reading a great book.
2. For potential/unknown/future plans or schedules.
 - What are you doing tonight?
 - I am not going out to the bar tonight.

Detailed Examples

Simple tense (permanent)	Continuous tense (temporary)
<i>The cells grow in acidic environments.</i>	<i>The cells are growing in the incubator.</i>
The first sentence indicates a fact or permanent feature of the cells—they can only grow under a certain condition. The second sentence indicates a temporary situation—the cells are growing in the incubator, but will presumably stop growing and eventually be used or moved elsewhere.	
<i>I play soccer.</i>	<i>I am playing soccer.</i>
The first sentence indicates that the speaker plays soccer routinely and is therefore considered permanent. The second sentence indicates the speaker is playing a game of soccer which will end eventually and is thus considered a temporary situation	
<i>Jane lives in New York City.</i>	<i>Jane is living in New Haven for the summer.</i>
In the first sentence, the use of simple present tense indicates that Jane normally resides in New York City: she gives no indication of moving elsewhere in the near future. The second sentence uses continuous tense as Jane will only be living in New Haven during the summer temporarily.	

Helpful Adverbs and Phrases

Both simple tense and continuous tense have commonly used phrases or adverbs which help further indicate permanence (for simple tense) or temporariness (for continuous tense). A good way to distinguish if you should use simple or continuous tense is to add either of these phrases/adverbs and see if the sentence still makes sense!

Common Adverbs for Simple Tense (adverbs come before the main verb in the sentence)		Common Adverbs/Phrases for Continuous Tense (phrases can come at the start or end of a sentence)	
Always	Sometimes	Currently	At the moment
Occasionally	Rarely	Presently	(Right) now
Frequently	Hardly ever		Nowadays
Normally	Never		or (a set amount of time)

Stative Verbs

Some verbs describe long-lasting or permanent conditions, and are commonly called **stative verbs**. Verbs which are not stative are known as **dynamic verbs** and usually describe an action. Because of their nature, stative verbs are usually used in the simple tense. Here is a short list of common stative verbs; you can refer to “Resources” for a more complete version.

Like/love	Understand	Recognize	Lack	Be	See
Dislike/hate	Prefer	Promise	Sound	Have	Smell
Know	Believe	Belong	Matter	Think	Taste

NOTE: Some stative verbs can be used in the simple and continuous tense (not a full list):

Verb	In Simple Tense	In Continuous Tense
Be	<i>Describing a fact:</i> You are quiet = it's part of your personality	<i>Behaving or acting a certain way:</i> You are being quiet today = not normally quiet
Think	<i>To have an opinion:</i> I think writing is fun	<i>Planning or contemplating:</i> I am thinking about tomorrow's dinner
Have	<i>To own:</i> I have three cats.	<i>Part of an expression:</i> I am having a party/vacation/event/a good time/etc.
Taste	<i>To have a taste; describes an aspect of food:</i> The coffee tastes bitter.	<i>The action of tasting:</i> We were tasting while we cooked.

Exercises

1. I [meet | am meeting] my professor this afternoon to discuss my thesis.
2. Janice [runs | is running] every morning, rain or shine.
3. Currently, Kari [travels | is travelling] around Hawaii to research dolphin feeding patterns.
4. As soon as the sick moose [strays | is straying] from the pack, the wolves attack.
5. The farm store [smells | is smelling] like freshly baked pies and just-picked strawberries.
6. Why [are you walking | are you walk] to work? Don't you normally [take | are taking] the bus?

Sources and Further Reading/Practice:

http://www.grammar.cl/Notes/Present_Tense_Progressive_Tense.htm

<http://www.eclecticenglish.com/grammar/PresentContinuous11.html>

For stative verbs: <http://www.perfect-english-grammar.com/stative-verbs.html>