



TOEFL Worksheet: The Four Past Tenses and Their Nine Uses

Read the explanation of the different present tenses and their uses below. Then do the activity on pages 4 and 5.

Simple Past

Form: Take the base verb and change the word form to the past tense form. Usually this means adding /ed/ to the end of the word. However, much like simple present tense, there are a lot of irregular verbs with different past tense forms.

Uses:

Use 1: Actions completed in the past:

EXAMPLES: The scientists **conducted** an experiment. They **thought** the experiment would prove their theory.

Past Continuous

Form: The past form of “to be” (was, were) + verb + ing

Uses:

Use 1: Describing a past action that hasn't been completed yet

EXAMPLES: I **was trying** to fix the car this morning, but I'm not done with the repairs yet. At 11pm, I **was still working** on my homework.

Use 2: Describing a past action that was interrupted by another action

EXAMPLES: The radio station **was broadcasting** music when the music was interrupted by an important announcement. I **was trying** to sleep when I heard a knock at my door.

*Use 3: When describing two past events that took place at the same time, this tense is used to describe the **longer** of the two events. (You can use simple past for the shorter event. You can also use past perfect for the shorter event; see Use 2 of past perfect later in this explanation for an example.)*

EXAMPLES: Marco Polo contacted Chinese merchants and leaders while he **was travelling** the world. She burned herself while she **was cooking** dinner.

Use 4: Describing a past action that took place in a specific time period and may have continued afterward

EXAMPLES: The science team **was conducting** research as recently as last month. Many students **were feeling** depressed in February. (*Note: In sentences like this, the use of past continuous implies that the activity **may***

have continued after the time period mentioned in the sentence. It also may have stopped. In other words, maybe the team of scientists in the first example are still doing research, or maybe they are not. And maybe the students kept feeling depressed after February, or maybe they felt better by March.)

Past Perfect

Form: had+ past form of a verb

Uses:

Use 1: When describing a series of actions, use past perfect to describe the action that happened first

EXAMPLES: I **had gone** home; then I read a book and fell asleep. The lawyers **had** slowly **worked** toward an agreement that was acceptable for everyone; then they printed the agreement and gave it to their clients.

*Use 2: When you are describing two past actions that take place at the same time, you can use past perfect tense to describe the **shorter** action. The longer action can be described using simple past tense or past continuous tense. See Use 3 of past continuous earlier in this explanation.*

EXAMPLES: Marco Polo **had contacted** Chinese merchants and leaders while he traveled the world. She **had burned** herself while she was cooking dinner. (*While these two sentences use slightly different tenses than the examples in Use 3 of past continuous, they have the exact same meaning as the earlier past continuous examples.*)

Use 3: Describing a past action that was finished in a specific time period:

EXAMPLES: The science team **had conducted** research as recently as last month. Many students **had felt** depressed in February. (*Note that these example sentences are almost identical to the example sentences for Use 4 of past continuous earlier in this past tense tutorial. The only difference is that they use past perfect verb tense instead. But this small difference changes the meaning of the sentence. In the past continuous example, the scientists may or may not have continued their research after last month, and the students may or may not have kept feeling depressed after February. However, in these new sentences with past perfect verbs, the scientists definitely did not continue their research after last month, and the students definitely stopped being depressed after February.*)

Past Perfect Continuous

Form: had + been + verb + ing

Uses:

Use 1: Describing an action that began further in the past than other actions, but

overlaps with actions that began later.

*This use is a little complicated, so read my explanation carefully: Suppose you want to describe a series of actions. Now suppose there's one action that started before the other actions, but continued even after the next action began. For example, imagine you began to eat dinner, and then while you were eating, you began to think about what you would do on the weekend. You would use the past perfect continuous to describe the action that started earlier (eating dinner) but happened partly at the same time as an action that started later (thinking about what you would do on the weekend). The action that started later would be described using simple past tense. So the sentence would look like this: **I had been eating dinner** when I thought about what I would do on the weekend.*

EXAMPLES: Chiang Kai Shek **had been leading** his political followers for many years when he and his followers fled from China to Taiwan. She said she **had been working** in a hospital when World War II started, and she worked there for many more years.

Activity:

Read the cartoons below. Which underlined form of the past tense appears in each word balloon, and why is that tense being used?

(Answer key on the final page)



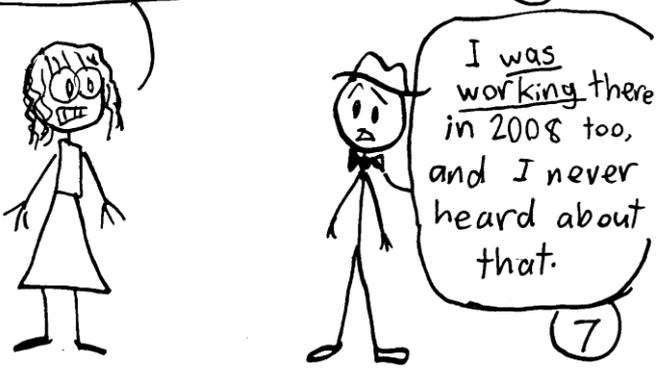
I had cut my finger while I chopped carrots. 4)

I had been a professional chef) (4)



5)

I loved working at the bank, but an armed robbery happened while I was working there in 2008. 6)



7)

Give me back that cookie dough. I was eating that! 8)

I wasn't done making the cookies yet. 9)



9)

Answer Key:

- 1) Simple past: action completed in the past
- 2) Past perfect continuous: describing an action that began further in the past than other actions, but overlaps with later actions
- 3) Past perfect: describing an action that happened first in a series of actions
- 4) Past perfect: describing a shorter action that takes place at the same time as a longer action
- 5) Past perfect: describing a past action that was finished in a specific time period
- 6) Past continuous: describing a longer action that takes place at the same time as a shorter action
- 7) Past continuous: describing a past action that took place in a specific time period and may have continued afterward
- 8) Past continuous: describing a past action that was interrupted by another action
- 9) Past continuous: describing a past action that hasn't been completed yet