

John Eastwood, Oxford *Guide to English Grammar* (2002)

Past Simple and Present Perfect - Overview

3 The perfect

These verb phrases have perfect aspect.

We have just finished the decorating.

We have been there a month now.

We had been looking for ages.

6 Present perfect and past simple

Both the British and the Americans use the present perfect for something in the past which is seen as related to the present. • 65(2)

GB/US: *I've just met an old friend.*

Dave has already eaten his lunch.

Have you ever seen St Paul's Cathedral?

I've never had a passport.

But Americans sometimes use the past simple in such contexts especially with *just*, *already*, *yet*, *ever* and *never*.

Mainly US: *I just met an old friend.*

Dave already ate his lunch.

Did you ever see the Empire State Building?

I never had a passport.

The perfect means 'up to now' or 'up to then'. The decorating came to an end in the period leading up to the present time.

We can sometimes choose the present perfect or the past simple, depending on how we see the action. • 65

We've finished the decorating. (in the period up to now)

We finished the decorating. (in the past)

65 Present perfect and past simple

THE SKI SHOP

Debbie: **Have you seen** the ski shop that's just **opened** in the High Street

? Nicola: Yes, it **opened** last week, didn't it? **I haven't been** in there yet.

Debbie: **I went** in yesterday. It's really good. **I bought** some gloves. We're going to Italy next winter, and I can buy clothes there.

Nicola: **I haven't skied** for ages actually. I've got some skis - I've **had** them for years. I used to ski a lot when I **was** younger.

Debbie: Where **did** you go?

Nicola: We **went** to Austria a few times.

Debbie: I've **been** to Scotland twice, but I've never **done** any skiing abroad. I'm really looking forward to Italy.

1 Form

Present perfect: present of <i>have</i> + past participle	Past simple: past form
<i>I/you/we/they have opened</i> <i>he/she/it has opened</i>	<i>someone opened</i>
Negative	
<i>I/you/we/they have not opened</i> <i>he/she/it has not opened</i>	<i>someone did not open</i>
Questions	
<i>have I/you/we/they opened?</i> <i>has he/she/it opened?</i>	<i>did someone open?</i>

Some participles and past forms are irregular, e.g. *seen*, *bought*. • 300

The perfect auxiliary is always *have*.

NOT *They are opened the shop* and NOT *I am hurt myself*.

In past simple questions and negatives we use *did* and the base form of the verb.

NOT *It did not opened* and NOT *Did it opened?*

NOTE

a There are some spelling rules for the ed-form.

Adding *d* after *e*: *close* *closed* • 291 (1)

Doubling of some consonants: *stop* *stopped* • 293

Y changing to *i*: *hurry* *hurried* • 294

b For pronunciation of the *ed* ending, • 291(2).

2 Use of the present perfect

The present perfect tells us about the past and about the present. We use it for an action in the period leading up to the present.

The shop has just opened. *The visitors have arrived.*

The post hasn't come yet. *Have you ever ridden a horse?*

The visitors have arrived means that the visitors are here now.

We can also use the present perfect for repeated actions.

Debbie has been to Scotland twice. *I've ridden lots of times.*

We've often talked about emigrating.

We can also use the present perfect for states.

I've had these skis for years. *The shop has been open a week.*

I've always known about you and Diana.

Some typical time expressions with the present perfect are *just*, *recently*, *lately*, *already*, *before*, *so far*, *still*, *ever/never*, *today*, *this morning/evening*, *for weeks/years*, *since 1988*. Some of these are also used with the past simple. • (5)

NOTE For *been to* and *gone to*, • 84(6).

3 Use of the past simple

- a We use the past simple for an action in the past.

*The shop opened last week. I bought some gloves yesterday.
The earthquake happened in 1905. I slept badly.
When did the first Winter Olympics take place?*

The time of the action (*last week*) is over.

The past is the normal tense in stories.

Once upon a time a Princess went into a wood and sat down by a stream.

Some typical time expressions with the past simple are *yesterday, this morning/evening, last week/year, a week/month ago, that day/afternoon, the other day/week, at eleven o'clock, on Tuesday, in 1990, just, recently, once, earlier, then, next, after that*. Some of these are also used with the present perfect. • (5)

NOTE

- a With the past simple we often say *when* the action happened.

I bought some gloves yesterday.

I went in the shop yesterday. It's really good. I bought some gloves.

It is clear from the context that the action *bought* happened yesterday.

Sometimes there is no phrase of time, but we understand a definite time in the past.

I didn't eat any breakfast. My sister took this photo.

- b A phrase with *ago* means a finished time. It does not include the present, even though we measure it from the present. Compare these sentences.

I saw that film on Wednesday/two days ago.

I've seen that film.

- b We can also use the past simple for repeated actions.

We went to Austria a few times. The children always played in the garden.

We can also use the past simple for states.

I was younger then. The Romans had a huge Empire.

We stayed on the Riviera for several weeks.

NOTE

- a There are other ways of expressing repeated actions in the past. • 100

We used to go to Austria. The children would always play in the garden.

- b For the past tense in a tentative request, e.g. *I wanted to ask you something*, • 61(1) Note. For the past tense expressing something unreal, e.g. *I wish I had more money*, • 241(3).

For the past tense expressing a possible future action, e.g. *If I told you, you'd laugh*, • 257(

4c) 4 Present perfect or past simple?

- a The choice depends on whether the speaker sees the action as related to the present or as in the past.

The shop has just opened.

The shop opened last week.

The two sentences can refer to the same action. The present perfect tells us something about the present: the shop is open now. But the past simple means a finished time (*last week*). It does not tell us about the present.

Present: *The shop has just opened. (So it's open now.)*

Past: *The shop opened last week. It's doing very well.*

The shop opened last week. Then it closed again two days later

Present: *The car has broken down. (So I have no transport now.)*

Past: *The car broke down. It's still off the road.*

The car broke down. But luckily we got it going again.

- b When we use the present perfect for a state, it means that the state still exists now. If the state is over, we use the past.
I've had these skis for years.
I had those skis for years. (Then I sold them.)
I've been here since three o'clock.
I was there from three o'clock to about five. (Then I left.)
 Compare the past simple for an action.
I bought these skis years ago. I arrived here at three o'clock.
- c When we use the present perfect for repeated actions, it means that the action may happen again. The past simple means that the series of actions is over.
Gayle has acted in more than fifty films. (Her career has continued up to now.)
Gayle acted in more than fifty films. (She is dead, or her career is over.)
- d Look at this news report.
There has been a serious accident on the M6. It happened at ten o'clock this morning near Preston when a lorry went out of control and collided with a car...
 The present perfect is used to give the fact of the accident and the past simple for details such as when and how it happened. We often use the present perfect to first mention a topic and the past simple for the details.
I've just been on a skiing holiday. ~ Oh, where did you go?
Have you sent in your application? ~ Yes, I sent it in ages ago.

5 Adverbials of time with the present perfect and past simple

Some adverbials used with both forms are *just, recently, already, once/twice* etc, *ever/never, today, this morning/week* etc and phrases with *for* and *since*. For American usage, • 303(6).

- a With *just* and *recently* there is little difference in meaning.
I've just heard the news. I just heard the news.
We've recently moved house. We recently moved house.
 Compare these examples with *already*.
I've already heard the news. (before now)
I already knew before you told me. (before then)
- b *Once, twice* etc with the present perfect means the number of times the action has happened up to now.
We've been to Scotland once/lots of times.
This is the third time my car has broken down this month.
 With the simple past *once* usually means 'at a time in the past'.
We went to Scotland once.
Ever/never with the present perfect means 'in all the time up to now'. With the simple past it refers to a finished period.
Have you ever visited our showroom?
Did you ever visit our old showroom?
- c We can use *this morning, this afternoon* and *today* with the present perfect when they include the present time. When the time is over, we use the past.
It has been windy this morning. (The morning is not yet over.)
It was windy this morning. (It is afternoon or evening.)

With *today* there is little difference in meaning.

It has been windy today. (The day is not yet over.)

It was windy today. (The day is over.)

Both sentences are spoken late in the day. The second must be in the evening. The speaker sees the day as over.

We use the present perfect with *this week/month/year* when we mean the whole period up to now.

I've seen a lot of television this week.

We use the simple past for one time during the period.

I saw an interesting programme this week.

We might say this on Friday about something two or three days earlier.

We often use the negative with phrases of unfinished time.

It hasn't been very warm today.

I haven't seen much television this week.

- d We often use *for* and *since* with the negative present perfect.

I haven't skied for years. /I haven't skied since 1988.

We can also use *since* with a clause.

I haven't skied since I was twelve.

Compare the past simple.

I last skied years ago/in 1988/when I was twelve.

We can also use a phrase with *for* with the past simple to say how long something went on.

I skied for hours.

NOTE

a We can use a pattern with *it* to emphasize the time.

It's years since I skied/I've skied. It was in 1988 (that) I last skied.

b *I've been here (for) a month* means that I arrived here a month ago. *I am here for a month* means that I have arranged to stay here for a month in total.