

FREE RESOURCE · GRAMMAR

Present perfect vs past simple

Use the past simple for an action that finished at a stated time in the past: I visited Rome in 2019. Use the present perfect when the time is not stated or the action still matters now: I have visited Rome three times. The key question is whether the time is finished and named.

What to know

The two forms

The past simple is the verb in its past form: I studied, she moved, they built. Regular verbs end in -ed. Irregular verbs change shape, such as go and went, or see and saw.

- *I studied biology at university.* · *I have studied biology for three years.*
- *She moved to Glasgow in 2020.* · *She has lived in Glasgow since 2020.*

Use the past simple for a finished time

Choose the past simple when you say, or clearly imagine, when the action happened and that time is finished. Time expressions that go with it include yesterday, last year, in 2018, two days ago, when I was a child, and on Monday.

Use the present perfect for experience, change and results

Choose the present perfect when the time is not important or not stated, or when the period includes now. There are three main uses.

- Words that often go with the present perfect: ever, never, already, yet, just, recently, so far, since, for, this week, today.
- Since goes with a starting point: since 2019, since Monday.
- For goes with a length of time: for three years, for a long time.
- Today, this week and this year are unfinished periods, so they can go with either tense, depending on whether the period feels finished.

From general to specific

A very natural pattern is to start with the present perfect and then move to the past simple for details. For example: I have visited Japan twice. The first time I went with my family, and we stayed in Kyoto for a week. The first sentence is an experience, and it is true now. The next sentences give specific, finished details, so they change to the past simple.

A quick test before you speak or write

Ask yourself two questions. First, can I say exactly when it happened? If yes, use the past simple. Second, does it matter now, or is the period still open? If yes, use the present perfect.

Exercises

1. I _____ in Bristol since 2021.
a. lived

b. have lived

c. live

2. She _____ her degree in 2019.

a. completed

b. has completed

c. has been completing

3. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) My brother (2) has bought (3) a new laptop (4) last month.

4. Have you ever _____ a lecture online?

a. attend

b. attending

c. attended

5. Start with Prices. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): since / rose / have / risen / 2015. / Prices

6. Correct this: *I have seen her yesterday.*

7. Scientists _____ a lot about climate change so far this century.

a. have learned

b. were learning

c. learned

8. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) I (2) lived in Madrid (3) since 2022, (4) so I speak some Spanish.

9. When _____ you first use a smartphone?

a. do

b. have

c. did

10. Correct this using the present perfect simple: *I am working here for three years.*

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/present-perfect-vs-past-simple/practice/

IELTS tip. In Speaking Part 1, answer a question such as Have you ever worked abroad? with the present perfect, then add one or two details in the past simple. In Writing Task 1, use the past simple for dated figures and the present perfect for change up to the present, such as Prices have risen since 2015.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Present perfect vs past simple

AIM	Learners choose between the present perfect and the past simple by asking whether the time is finished and stated.
TIME	30 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Ask learners three questions: Where did you go yesterday? Have you ever been to London? How long have you lived here? Write the tenses on the board and ask what changed.

Lesson steps

1. Draw a timeline with now at the end. Mark finished times on the left and an unfinished period reaching now on the right.
2. Give learners cards with time expressions (last year, ever, since 2020, in 2015, so far) and ask them to place each on the correct side of the timeline.
3. Pair work: learners ask each other Have you ever...? questions and follow up with details in the past simple.
4. Review errors with a board activity: each learner fixes one wrong sentence and explains the time expression.

Extension

Learners write a short IELTS Writing Task 1 paragraph from a table of dated figures and mark each verb as past simple or present perfect.

Answer key

1. b) have lived. Since 2021 starts a period that continues now, so use the present perfect.
2. a) completed. In 2019 is a finished time, so the past simple is needed.
3. Part 2: *has bought* → **bought**. Last month is a finished time, so the verb must be in the past simple.
4. c) attended. Have you ever needs the past participle. Attended is both the past simple and the participle.
5. Prices have risen since 2015. Since 2015 starts a period that continues, so the present perfect is used: have plus the past participle.
6. I saw her yesterday. Yesterday is a finished time, so use the past simple.
7. a) have learned. So far this century is a period that is not finished, so the present perfect fits.

8. Part 2: *lived in Madrid* → **have lived in Madrid**. Since 2022 needs the present perfect to show a situation that started in the past and continues.
9. c) did. When asks about a finished time, so the question uses did plus the base verb.
10. I have worked here for three years. For three years describes a period up to now, so use have plus the past participle.

Questions learners often ask

What is the main difference between the present perfect and the past simple? The past simple is for finished actions at a stated time, and the present perfect is for experience or results that connect to the present. Ask whether the time is finished and named.

Can I use just now with the present perfect? Not usually. In British English, use just with the present perfect (I have just finished) and just now with the past simple (I finished just now).

What is the difference between I have lived here for five years and I lived here for five years? The second sentence suggests you no longer live there. If you still live there, use the present perfect.

Which tense should I use for the IELTS Writing Task 1 chart? Use the past simple for dated figures in the past and the present perfect for change up to now. The graph tells you which.

Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. and Finegan, E. (1999). Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English. Longman.

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