

# Making English Grammar Meaningful and Useful

## Mini Lesson #3

### The English Tense System – So Many, but Not So Difficult

The **purpose** of this lesson is to understand the fundamental concept of **TENSE** and to understand the systematic nature of the English Tenses.

To learn English tenses, one must consider the answers to three fundamental questions. First, what is a tense? Second, what do tenses mean? Third, how are tenses formed and how do they relate to each other?

First, a tense is a necessary component of nearly every English sentence or question. It exists whenever an utterance contains a **subject-verb combination**. It communicates something about the **time** of the action or state of being of the sentence. It is composed of a primary or **main verb**, usually accompanied by one or more **helping verbs**. When an action or state of being word, i.e. a verb, is used outside of a subject-verb combination, that verb does not have tense. Chart #1 presents examples of the 12 English tenses.

**Chart #1 – Examples of 12 English Tenses**

|                           | <b>Simple<br/>Tenses</b><br>(simple) | <b>Continuing<br/>Tenses</b><br>(progressive) | <b>Before<br/>Tenses</b><br>(perfect)    | <b>Continuing<br/>Before Tenses</b><br>(perfect progressive) |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| <b>Future<br/>Tenses</b>  | <b>I will walk</b><br>home.          | <b>I will be walking</b><br>home.             | <b>I will have</b><br><b>walked</b> home | <b>I will have been</b><br><b>walking</b> home               |
| <b>Present<br/>Tenses</b> | <b>I walk</b> home                   | <b>I am walking</b><br>home.                  | <b>I have walked</b><br>home             | <b>I have been</b><br><b>walking</b> home                    |
| <b>Past<br/>Tenses</b>    | <b>I walked</b><br>home              | <b>I was walking</b><br>home                  | <b>I had walked</b><br>home              | <b>I had been</b><br><b>walking</b> home                     |

The names of the tenses refer to their meanings by combining the **time** of the tense (the row) with the **kind** of tense (the column): e.g. Simple-Future Tense, Present-Continuing Tense, Past-Before Tense. (Traditional tense names are in parentheses.)

Second, English tenses convey 3 kinds of meanings: **when** an action occurred, whether the action **continues** over a period of time, and whether it happens **before** a particular time. These time concepts in various combinations reflect the meanings of all 12 English tenses. These meanings are presented in Chart #2.

**Chart #2 – The Meanings of English Tenses**

|                       | <b>Simple Tenses</b>               | <b>Continuing Tenses</b>           | <b>Before Tenses</b>                  | <b>Continuing Before Tenses</b>                      |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Future Tenses</b>  | occurring at a <b>future time</b>  | <b>continuing</b> at a future time | occurring <b>before</b> a future time | occurring and <b>continuing before</b> a future time |
| <b>Present Tenses</b> | occurring at a <b>regular time</b> | <b>continuing</b> now              | occurring <b>before</b> now           | occurring and <b>continuing before</b> now           |
| <b>Past Tenses</b>    | occurring at a <b>past time</b>    | <b>continuing</b> at a past time   | occurring <b>before</b> a past time   | occurring and <b>continuing before</b> a past time   |

Third, English tenses are formed utilizing various **Verb Forms** and **Helping Verbs**. They relate to each other in various ways. This is illustrated in **Chart #3**.

**Chart #3 – The Structures of English Tenses**

|                       | <b>Simple Tenses</b>                | <b>Continuing Tenses</b>                | <b>Before Tenses</b>                | <b>Continuing Before Tenses</b>                    |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Future Tenses</b>  | will + <b>Simple form</b>           | will + <b>be</b> + <b>ING form</b>      | will + <b>have</b> + <b>ED form</b> | will + <b>have</b> + <b>been</b> + <b>ING form</b> |
| <b>Present Tenses</b> | <b>Simple form</b> or <b>S form</b> | <b>am, is, or are</b> + <b>ING form</b> | <b>have or has</b> + <b>ED form</b> | <b>have or has</b> + <b>been</b> + <b>ING form</b> |
| <b>Past Tenses</b>    | <b>ED form</b>                      | <b>was or were</b> + <b>ING form</b>    | <b>had</b> + <b>ED form</b>         | <b>had</b> + <b>been</b> + <b>ING Form</b>         |

- Ten out of twelve tenses contain **Helping Verbs**.
- All **Future Tenses** use ‘will’. Present tenses use the present form of the 1<sup>st</sup> verb in each tense. Past tenses use the past form of the 1<sup>st</sup> verb in each tense.
- All **Continuing Tenses** use a form of ‘**BE**’ plus the ‘**ING form**’ of the main verb.
- All **Before Tenses** use a form of ‘**HAVE**’ plus the “**ED Form** of the main verb.

ELLs need to learn to think of using at least one of these tenses in every utterance they make.