**The Simple Past Tense**, often just called the Past Tense, is easy to use in English.

If you already know how to use the Present Tense, then the Past Tense will be easy.

In general, the Past Tense is used to talk about something that started and finished at a definite time in the past.

**How to form the Past Tense in English**

The main rule is that for every verb in English, there is only one form of it in the past tense.

(The exception is the Past tense of To Be, which has two forms: was and were)

This is totally different from other languages such as Spanish, French, Italian etc. where you change the verb ending for every subject.

For example: The past tense of the verb want is wanted.

Wanted is used as the past tense for all subjects/pronouns.

I wanted

You wanted

He wanted

She wanted

It wanted

We wanted

They wanted

So you just have to learn one word to be able to use it in the past tense. In this case we just needed to learn the one word wanted which can be used for all subjects (or people).

Past Tense Regular Verbs

To change a regular verb into its past tense form, we normally add –ED to the end of the verb.

play – played

cook – cooked

rain – rained

wait – waited

There are some exceptions with a slight change in spelling which you can see here:

Spelling of words ending in ED.

Examples of sentences using regular verbs in the past tense

Last night I played my guitar loudly and the neighbors complained.

She kissed me on the cheek.

It rained yesterday.

Angela watched TV all night.

John wanted to go to the museum.

Note: There are three different ways of pronouncing the –ed at the end of a verb in the past tense.

We recommend reading our guide about the pronunciation of –ED at the end of words.

**Negative sentences in the Past Tense**

We use didn't (did not) to make a negative sentence in the past tense.

This is for regular AND irregular verbs in English.

(Exception is To Be and Modal Verbs such as Can)

Compare the following:

Present: They don't live in Canada.

Past: They didn't live in Canada.

The main verb (live in the example above) is in its base form (of the infinitive). The auxiliary DIDN'T shows that the sentence is negative AND in the past tense.

NOTICE: The only difference between a negative sentence in the present tense and a negative sentence in the past tense is the change in the auxiliary verb.

Both don't and doesn't in the present tense become didn't in the past tense.

Compare the negative sentences in the examples below:

Present: You don't need a mechanic.

Past: You didn't need a mechanic.

Present: You don't walk to work.

Past: You didn't walk to work.

Present: He doesn't speak Japanese.

Past: He didn't speak Japanese.

Examples of negative sentences in the Past Tense

I didn't want to go to the dentist.

She didn't have time.

You didn't close the door.

He didn't come to my party.

They didn't study so they didn't pass the test.

We didn't sleep well last night.

**The Past Perfect Formula**

The formula for the past perfect tense is had + [past participle]. It doesn’t matter if the subject is singular or plural; the formula doesn’t change.

**When to Use the Past Perfect**

So what’s the difference between past perfect and simple past? When you’re talking about some point in the past and want to reference an event that happened even earlier, using the past perfect allows you to convey the sequence of the events. It’s also clearer and more specific. Consider the difference between these two sentences:

We were relieved that Tootles used washable paint. We were relieved that Tootles had used washable paint.

It’s a subtle difference, but the first sentence doesn’t tie Tootles’s act of using washable paint to any particular moment in time; readers might interpret it as “We were relieved that Tootles was in the habit of using washable paint.” In the second sentence, the past perfect makes it clear that you’re talking about a specific instance of using washable paint.

Another time to use the past perfect is when you are expressing a condition and a result:

If I had woken up earlier this morning, I would have caught Tootles red-handed.

The past perfect is used in the part of the sentence that explains the condition (the if-clause).

Most often, the reason to write a verb in the past perfect tense is to show that it happened before other actions in the same sentence that are described by verbs in the simple past tense. Writing an entire paragraph with every verb in the past perfect tense is unusual.

When Not to Use the Past Perfect

Don’t use the past perfect when you’re not trying to convey some sequence of events. If your friends asked what you did after you discovered the graffiti, they would be confused if you said:

I had cleaned it off the door.

They’d likely be wondering what happened next because using the past perfect implies that your action of cleaning the door occurred before something else happened, but you don’t say what that something else is. The “something else” doesn’t always have to be explicitly mentioned, but context needs to make it clear. In this case there’s no context, so the past perfect doesn’t make sense.

How to Make the Past Perfect Negative

Making the past perfect negative is simple! Just insert not between had and [past participle].

We looked for witnesses, but the neighbors had not seen Tootles in the act. If Tootles had not included his own name in the message, we would have no idea who was behind it.

**How to Ask a Question**

The formula for asking a question in the past perfect tense is had + [subject] + [past participle].