

**Part II**

**Being sociable**

## Chapter Five

### Indicating when it happened

#### Grammar Focus. Tense and aspect

#### Introduction.

Before we look at how tense works in English, let's test your grammatical intuitions. How do we talk about things that have already happened?

#### Awareness Activity 5.1. Talking about the past.

Suppose you were the second speaker in the following conversational exchanges. Which verb form would you choose? (Don't think about it too much.)

A. Speaker 1: : Let's go see the new *Matrix* movie

Speaker 2: Thanks, but I (saw) ('ve seen) it.

B. Speaker 1: Let's go see the new *Matrix* movie

Speaker 2: Thanks, but I (saw) ('ve seen) it yesterday.

C. Speaker 1: Barbara sure is hanging around a lot lately.

Speaker 2: Yah, I (ran) ('ve run) into her several times today.

D. Speaker 1: Did you go dancing at the new club last night?

Speaker 2: Naw, I (was) ('d been) there already. I wanted to go somewhere new.

E. Speaker 1: Did you help John wax his car yesterday?

Speaker 2: Yep, we were finished by ten. He sure (loved) (loves) that machine.

In exchange A did you choose *'ve seen*? The majority of native speakers of English do. The descriptive rule of thumb is that when a conversation focuses on present time events (Speaker 1: *Let's go see*), the verbs in the conversational exchange use grammatical forms based on the **present tense**. Within this present time orientation, to indicate that something happened earlier (i.e. is completed or "perfect"), use the **present perfect** rather than the past.

The grammatical context is different for exchange B. Although speaker 1 says the same thing as speaker 1 in exchange A, speaker 2 uses a definite past time word *yesterday*. Under these conditions native speakers choose the **past tense** form *saw*.

Did you choose *'ve run* in exchange C? Notice that it follows the same descriptive rule as exchange A. The conversation revolves around the present time (speaker 1. *Barbara is hanging around*) with the use of the **present progressive**, so speaker 2 continues in the present using the present perfect (*I've run*) to indicate an action that happened earlier. Notice again that the present perfect is used rather than the past to talk about past actions.

In exchange D speaker 1 used the past tense (*did*) because of the time word *last night*. Native speakers choose *'d been*, the **past perfect** for speaker 2 to indicate that the action had already happened by that time. In other words, speaker 2 didn't go to the club last night but had gone at an earlier time. Choosing the simple past *was* would imply that speaker 2 was at the club last night since speaker 1 placed the conversation in the simple past at a specific time.

So far we have seen that in order to decide which tense to use to indicate that something has already happened, we have to know the time frame of the conversation. The rule of thumb is that if the conversational interchange is set in the present time, then earlier events are indicated through the present perfect unless a definite past time has been specified. If the conversational interchange is set in the past time, the past perfect is used to indicate that something happened earlier.

<b>Rules of thumb: Part 1.</b> Deciding which tense form to use.		
<b>Conversation set in present time</b>		
<b>Currently</b> happening	<b>present</b> and <b>present progressive</b>	<i>I see that JJ is resting</i>
<b>Already</b> happened <b>but</b> <b>no</b> definite time expressed	<b>present perfect</b>	<i>I see that JJ has rested.</i>
<b>Already</b> happened <b>and</b> definite time expressed	<b>simple past</b>	<i>I see that JJ rested last night.</i>
<b>Conversation set in past time</b>		
Happened <b>at</b> that time in the past	<b>simple past</b>	<i>When we picked him up, JJ rested.</i>
Happened <b>before</b> that time in the past	<b>past perfect</b>	<i>When we picked him up, JJ had already rested.</i>

Exchange E introduces another pattern. Speaker 1 uses the past tense (*did*) because of the time word *yesterday*. Speaker 2 continues in the past (*were*) because of the rule of thumb we just looked at. Notice, however, that the meaning changes when it comes to deciding whether to choose *loved* or *loves*. *Loved* implies that he no longer has the car because he crashed it or sold it. Maybe he even died. *Loves* indicates that he is still alive, he still has the car, and the feelings are still true. This is the second discourse rule to keep in mind when deciding which tense to use. If you want to indicate that something still is true or always is true, switch the time to the present until you finish making your true statements. In other words, tense forms are used in English not just to indicate the time something happened, but to indicate whether or not something is still true.

**Rules of thumb: Part 2.** Deciding which tense to use.

**Conversation set in any tense**

The information is **still**  
true or is **always** true

**present tense**

*He remembered that love  
conquers all.*

**Grammar.**

To understand how tense works in English we first have to look at what linguists call **tense** and **aspect**. Tense indicates the time that the action of the verb took place in relationship to the time when the activity is being reported, e.g. now (the **present tense**), earlier (the **past tense**), or later (the **future tense**). Historically English has endings or vowel changes for only two of these tenses,

present and past (*He plays/He played. She swims/She swam.*). It doesn't have endings for a future tense. This is a characteristic of all the Germanic languages (e.g. Danish, Dutch, English, German, Norwegian, Swedish). If you have studied French or Spanish, you know that their verbs also have endings for the future. (e.g. Spanish *hablo, hablé, hablaré* I speak, I spoke, I will speak).

**Aspect.** In addition to marking the verb for tense, English may mark it for two aspects. Aspect is closely related to tense but rather than indicating when something happened, it emphasizes that the action is in progress or is happening at the time expressed or that it is completed. In the last chapter we saw that the ending that indicates that the action of the verb is happening is *-ing* and that verbs with this ending are traditionally called **present participles** (*jumping, eating, swimming, writing*). Probably a better label would be **action participles** because as an aspect they are independent of the present tense. For example, they can be used in the past (*He was swimming*). They can also be used as adjectives to indicate that the noun it modifies is causing or doing the action expressed in the adjective (*The swimming dog, the falling tree, the embarrassing event*). It can also be used as a noun to emphasize involvement in the action (*Swimming is such fun. I stopped swimming.*) When present participles are used as nouns, they are called **gerunds**. This *-ing* form with its associated meaning of being involved in the action is very common. It is the first verb ending that children learn.

As we saw in the last chapter, the second ending that marks an aspect is closely related to the past tense since it indicates that the action is over or

completed. The verb when it has the *-ed/-en* ending or has a special vowel change is called the **past participle** (*jumped, eaten, swum, written*). However, just the word *present* in *present participle* is misleading, so is the use of *past* in *past participle* since this aspect too is independent of tense. For example, it is commonly used with the present tense *have* (Have + Verb+-ed/-en) (*I have seen him.*). Another common frame is with *be* (Be + Verb + -ed/-en) (*The garbage is picked up at noon. It is reported that...*) to form the passive, indicating that the subject of the verb is not causing the action but receiving or experiencing it. In fact, for pedagogical purposes it might be useful to call this the **passive participle** to contrast it with the action participle. This contrast can especially be seen when these two participles are used as adjectives. Contrast for example *the bloodied nose* with *the bleeding nose*. In the first something has happened to the nose and there is blood on it. In the second the blood is coming from the nose. Notice the same contrasts in *the bored woman* and *the boring woman* or *the bruised wrestler* and *the bruising wrestler*. We will follow tradition and call them present participles and past participles rather than action participles and passive participle with a reminder that the names are misleading when describing how they are used.

No matter what we call these two participles, they combine with the present and past tense and with a form that has developed to indicate the future tense to form the twelve English tenses. Since these tenses are formed by combining words rather than by adding endings, they are called **periphrastic**

tenses. Their names are based on the various combinations of tenses and aspects.

**The present tenses.** The first four combinations of tense and aspect are based on the present tense. The first, often called the **present** or the **simple present** since it does not include an aspect, was discussed in the last chapter. It is characterized by verb agreement with the third person singular. (*Sharon makes bread every day.*) The next, called the **present perfect**, is based on the frame Have + Verb + -ed/-en. In other words the auxiliary verb *have* in the present tense is followed by the past participle. (*Sharon has made bread every day.*) The third is the **present progressive**, based on the frame Be + Verb + -ing. In other words the auxiliary verb *be* in the present tense is followed by the present participle. (*Sharon is making bread every day.*) The fourth of the present tenses is the **present perfect progressive**, which as the name indicates is based on the frame Have + Be + -ed/-en + Verb + -ing. In other words the auxiliary *have* in the present tense is followed by *be* as a past participle followed by the verb in its present participle form. (*Sharon has been making bread every day.*)

<b>The present tenses:</b>		
<b>Simple present</b>	V or V + -s	John eats bread. We wash cars.
<b>Present perfect</b>	Have + V + ed/-en	John has eaten bread. We have washed cars.

<b>Present progressive</b>	Be + V + -ing	John is eating bread. We are washing cars.
<b>Present perfect progressive</b>	Have + Be + -ed/-en + V + -ing	John has been eating bread. We have been washing cars.

**The past tenses.** The four tenses based on the past are formed in similar ways. The **past** or **simple past**, since it has no aspect, was also discussed in the last chapter. (*Sharon baked bread every day.*) The **past perfect** is based on the same frame as the present perfect except the auxiliary *have* is in the past tense form. (*Sharon had baked bread every day.*) In a similar manner the **past progressive** (*Sharon was baking bread every day*) and the **past perfect progressive** (*Sharon had been baking bread every day*) are formed. Remember, the marking for tense, whether present or past, is always attached to the first word of the sequence, i.e. the verb itself if it is used alone, as in the simple present or past, or to the first auxiliary when the verb is combined with the various aspects.

<b>The past tenses</b>		
<b>Simple past</b>	V + ed (or vowel change)	John ate bread. We washed cars.
<b>Past perfect</b>	Had + V + ed/-en	John had eaten bread. We had washed cars.
<b>Past progressive</b>	Was/were + V + -ing	John was eating bread. We were washing cars.

<b>Present perfect progressive</b>	Had + Be + -ed/-en + V + -ing	John had been baking bread. We had been washing cars.
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**The future tenses.** The **future** is not quite as straight forward. There is no ending for the verb or the first auxiliary. For most of the history of the English language, the future was formed simply by adding a future time word, such as *tomorrow* or *next Sunday*, to a sentence in the present tense. This is still possible, as in *Sharon bakes bread tomorrow*. However, new alternatives have developed. For the written language the most common future is formed by adding a *will* to the beginning of the frame that identifies the verb as in *Sharon will bake bread every day*. *Will* or the contraction *'ll* can also be used in conversation, but there is another competing form commonly called the *gonna* or *going to* future, as in *Sharon is going to (gonna) bake bread every day*. This form doesn't appear in writing except in a very conversational style that might be found in cartoons or in fiction. That's why grammar books usually call it the *gonna* future rather than the *going to* future, reflecting its pronunciation when used to indicate the future. Notice the difference in pronunciation of *going to* in *I'm going to see her tomorrow* and *I'm going to the store*. Only the first one indicating the future may be pronounced *gonna*. Another way to indicate the future is to use the progressive with a future time word, as in *Sharon is baking bread tomorrow*. There is another future based on the frame Be + To + Verb, as

in *We are to start tomorrow*. In the American South the frame *Be + fixing to + Verb* can also be used, as in *I'm fixing to start on that*.

Grammar books, since they tend to focus on academic written English, ignore all but the *will* form of the future. Thus they give the four future tenses as though *will* is always the first element. In other words, the **future** is based on the frame *Will + Verb* (*Sharon will bake bread every day.*); the **future perfect** is based on the frame *Will + Have + Verb +-ed/-en* (*Sharon will have baked bread every day.*); the **future progressive** is based on the frame *Will + Be + Verb + -ing* (*Sharon will be baking bread every day.*); and the **future perfect progressive** is based on the frame *Will + Have + Be + -ed/-en + Verb + -ing* (*Sharon will have been baking bread every day.*).

The future tenses: Part 1. written standard		
<b>Simple future</b>	Will + V	John will eat bread. We will wash cars.
<b>Future perfect</b>	Will + Have + V + ed/-en	John will have eaten bread. We will have washed cars.
<b>Future progressive</b>	Will + Be + V + -ing	John will be eating bread. We will be washing cars.
<b>Future perfect progressive</b>	Will + Have + Be + -ed/-en + V + -ing	John will have been baking bread. We will have been washing cars.

<b>The future tenses: Part 2. spoken alternative</b>		
<b>Simple future</b>	Be + gonna + V	John's gonna eat bread. We're gonna wash cars.
<b>Future perfect</b>	Be + gonna + Have + V + ed/-en	John's gonna have eaten bread. We're gonna have washed cars.
<b>Future progressive</b>	Be + gonna + Be + V + -ing	John's gonna be eating bread. We're gonna be washing cars.
<b>Future perfect progressive</b>	Be + gonna + Have + Be +-ed/-en + V +-ing	John's gonna have been baking bread. We're gonna have been washing cars.

### **Pragmatics and Discourse.**

However, the difficulty with tenses comes not from knowing their names or even their forms but from deciding which one to use and when. There is no one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning in the verb phrase. As we found with the grammatical terms present participle and past participle, the traditional names used in grammar discussions often are misleading as to how a particular point of grammar is used. For example, one tense form, such as the present tense, can represent quite different meanings. In the sentence *He eats there a lot*, the present tense *eats* can indicate an action that happened in the past and probably will happen in the future but may not be happening now. In jokes, the present tense can indicate actions that took place in the past (*A priest, a pastor and a rabbi are stranded on a desert isle, the priest sees.....*). On the

other hand, we have seen that future time can be expressed by several different tense forms. Pragmatics and discourse provide some answers for how to match tense forms to the messages we want to convey.

**Pragmatics and the present.** Let's look first at the present time frame since it predominates in conversation, in the news, and in academic writing. For pedagogical reasons it might be best to think of the simple present tense as the **truth tense** rather than as the tense that tells what is happening now. We use the present to state the facts. In fact mental verbs introducing our feelings of logic and our sense of right and wrong tend to be in the present (*bet, differ, feel, imply, know, mean, mind, reckon, think, want*). The facts being expressed might be such things as general conditions (*The food is ready. Water freezes at 32 degrees. It rains in Spain mainly on the plain.*) or habitual behavior (*I shave in the morning. He mows the lawn himself.*).

To indicate that a physical activity not only is true but is going on right now, the present progressive, sometimes called the **conversational present** is used. (*I'm shaving. We're serving the food. It's raining in Spain. He's mowing the lawn.*) As we saw in AA 5.1, to indicate that something has already happened, we use the present perfect (*I've washed the dishes.*). To indicate that the activity started in the past and has been going on for some time, perhaps to indicate diligence, annoyance, or frustration, we use the present perfect progressive. (*I've been working on this all morning.*) To indicate that this fact or condition will be true in the future, we use one of the future tense forms. (*It will rain in Spain. He's*

*going to mow the lawn. She washes the dishes tomorrow.*) In other words, the discourse rule is that when we decide to focus on the indicating true conditions, we switch between these four tense forms depending on whether we are emphasizing what has happened already, is happening now, will happen in the future, or is a general condition.

<b>Rules of Thumb: Tenses and true conditions.</b>		
General condition that is always true	<b>Present tense</b> (truth tense)	Apples are good for you. Its cost depends on how much money you have.
A true condition happening now	<b>Present progressive</b> (conversational present)	He's washing the dishes. They're mailing a letter.
A true condition that has happened	<b>Present perfect</b>	I've bought a car. She's been to London.
A true condition that started in the past and has continued unceasingly	<b>Present perfect progressive</b>	I've been studying all morning. He's been sleeping since noon.
A true condition that will happen	<b>Future</b>	I'm gonna mow the lawn. He'll be here at 6.

**Pragmatics and the past.** The past time frame is used to talk about things that happened in the past with no reference to whether or not it is still a true condition. Although the past time frame can be used in conversation,

journalism, or academic writing, it is most common in fiction. In fact certain verbs tend to always be in the past, reflecting their use for reporting conversation in fiction (*exclaim, remark, reply, say, whisper*). Things that happened in the past are expressed using the simple past (*The water froze. I shaved. She washed the dishes.*). The past progressive indicates what was happening when another event expressed by the past tense occurred (*I was shaving when the phone rang.*) Events that happened earlier than the event expressed by the past tense are expressed through the past perfect (*I had finished my work when the phone rang.*) There isn't really a future in the past. Things that have not yet happened at the past time are sometimes expressed with *would*, the past tense form of *will* (*I thought I would come with you.*), with the implication that the event did not happen as had been expected. In other words, the use of past tense forms makes no commitment as to whether or not the condition expressed is still true.

<b>Rules of thumb. Tenses and past conditions</b>		
Past event, condition may no longer be true	<b>Simple past</b>	The water froze. I hated math.
Interrupted past event	<b>Past progressive</b>	I was reading the paper when the phone rang.
Event that happened before another past event	<b>Past perfect</b>	I had finished my supper when he called.
A possible future event seen from the past. May not have happened.	<b>Would + verb</b>	I thought I would see him in the park.

**Pragmatics and the future.** Since the way we express the future in English is a more recent grammatical development and has a variety of forms, the rules for knowing which form to use are less clear cut. We will look only at the *will* form since that is the version used both in written and spoken English.

The future time frame is much less frequently used than the present or the past, occurring mostly in promises or predictions. (*We will eat when you arrive.*) Notice that the future in English seldom occurs in subordinate clauses, clauses which begin with such words as *when* or *if* (*If you do that, we will be happy*). In other languages with a future tense form, such as French, both verbs would be marked for the future (*We will eat when you will arrive* and *If you will do that, we will be happy*.) The future perfect indicates that something has already happened when the future event takes place (*We will have finished the test by the time you get here.*) Again, notice that the second verb *get*, because it is in a subordinate clause, is not marked for the future even though the action it specifies happens after the event marked by *will* (*have finished*). In the same way that the past progressive is used with the past tense, the future progressive indicates a future action that will be going on when another action, usually expressed in the present tense because it is in a subordinate clause, occurs (*We will be eating when you call.*)

<b>Rules of thumb. Tenses and future conditions</b>		
Predicted or promised activity	Predicted or promised activity in the <b>future</b> , the conditions expressed in present	I'll see you when I get there.  They'll have it ready by the time you wake up.
Predicted or promised activity completed before a future event takes place.	The completed promised or predicted activity in the <b>future perfect</b> , the future event expressed in the present	We'll have finished the job by the time you get here.
Predicted or promised activity will be going on when interrupted by another activity	The predicted or promised activity in the <b>future progressive</b> , the interrupting activity in the present	We'll be eating breakfast when you wake up.

**Tense sequencing in discourse.** Notice how this principle of setting a basic time and then switching between tenses according to time sequencing principles or according to truth value governs the following paragraphs that might appear in a newspaper.

- A. The Center for the Performing Arts plays host to two performers at opposite ends of the musical spectrum this week. First up is Bob McGrath

from *Sesame Street*, who appears at the Center for one show Oct. 19 at 2 p.m. McGrath teaches children the joys of musical theatre and dance.

Then classic rock and roller Little Richard explodes on the stage on Oct. 21 at 8 p.m. The architect of rock 'n' roll performs his smash hits from the '50's.

- B. Toyota Motor Corp. rolled out the world's first gasoline-electric hybrid car Tuesday. The car is only being sold in Japan. All major automakers, including Detroit's Big Three, are working on some type of hybrid. Toyota has priced the Prius at about \$17,700.

Notice in passage A how only the present tense or the truth tense is used to indicate exactly what people can expect when they attend the show. Passage B starts out in the past because of the time word Tuesday then switches to the present time frame to report true facts that the reader can count on. The progressive is used to emphasize that the work is happening now. It closes with a present perfect to indicate the price has already been set.

Passage C below demonstrates another way that tenses can switch to indicate to the listener that what they are hearing is true. This is a story being told to some friends.

- C. We were so scared. Suddenly I hear this sound behind me. I turn around and guess what I see—a bear.

This is an example of what some call the **historical present** or the **narrative present**. Although the story starts out in the past, it switches to the present to indicate that this really happened and that the speaker is telling the truth. This is

common in conversation when telling stories. You may have used it yourself in telling spooky stories around the campfire. It also is used in telling jokes.

**Politeness and tense.** One of the basic principles of politeness is that we do not impose our ideas on others. One of the characteristics of the present tense is that it emphasizes that something is true. What do English speakers do if they want to be more gentle or subtle in their requests and statements? There are two ways we want to look at now. One is to use past tense forms and the other is to use **modals** to indicate a stance or a hedge.

As we saw in our look at the past tense, although the present tense imposes the truth of an event on the listener, the past tense does not. In fact, as we saw in the future of the past (*I thought I would come.*), there is an underlying assumption that what is being reported may not have happened although it was predicted or promised. Notice how this use of past tense forms is less imposing or implies a negative in interpersonal relations in the following pairs even though the time frame for the suggest activity is the same.

A. Do you want a cup of coffee?

Did you want cup of coffee?

B. Professor McHenry, I think I'll ask a favor of you.

Professor McHenry, I thought I'd ask a favor of you.

C. If you are prepared, you can solve a few of these problems.

If you were prepared, you could solve a few of these problems.

Another way to be more polite is to indicate a **stance** or a moderating opinion about the verb by using a modal auxiliary such as *may, might, can, or could*.

We'll look at the modals in more detail in Chapter Seven. Notice how the modals soften the certainty of the present tense in the following pairs.

D. The present tense indicates the truthfulness of a statement.

The present tense may indicate the truthfulness of a statement.

E. The decision is final.

The decision might be final.

One characteristic of modals is that although they may have a present and past form (e.g. *may, might, shall, should, can, could*), the past form (*might, should, could*) does not indicate past time. For example, both *may* with a present tense form and *might* with a past tense form give the same notion of indefiniteness or tentativeness in the present in examples D and E. The same modals can be used to indicate a tentative stance for events that have already happened. To do this, they are combined with the auxiliary verb *have* in the frame Have + Verb + -ed/-en (*The decision was final* becomes *The decision might have been final*. *The present tense indicated the truthfulness of a statement* becomes *The present tense may have indicated the truthfulness of a statement*. *I have seen it already* becomes *I may have seen it already*). Therefore when asked to name the tense of a sentence with modals, if the time frame of the discussion is in the present, consider the sentence with the modals in the present time frame (*I think she may go home*. Present. *I think she might go home*. Present. *I think she may have gone home*. Present perfect. *I think she might have gone home*. Present perfect.) If the time frame is in the past, the frame

Modal + have + Verb + -ed/-en indicates that the modal is continuing the past time sequence (*It was so late that we thought she may have gone home.* Past.)

### Reflections.

#### Some concepts.

- The traditional names of the tenses are based on grammatical form, not meaning and use.
- Choosing which tense to use depends on discourse and pragmatic principles.
- The same tense forms may signal different meanings depending on pragmatic factors.

#### Some key terminology.

Be sure to look at the charts earlier in the chapter to review the names of the tenses and how they are used.

- **aspect**—combines with tense to indicate whether the action is going on (*It is breaking.*) or has been completed at the time expressed by the tense (*It has broken.*)
- **conversational present**—the **present progressive** expressing actions going on now, (*I'm swimming.*)
- **modals for stance**—in addition to using past tense forms to soften the pushiness of the present tense, modals such as *can* and *may* are used to soften the stance, (*Your attitude indicates a lack of confidence.* versus *Your attitude may indicate a lack of confidence.*) In accordance with using past tense forms to soften the present tense, past tense

forms of modals help soften the tone even more, (*Your attitude might indicate a lack of confidence.*)

- **past participle**—sometimes call the **passive participle**. This form of the verb is formed in a variety of ways, most commonly by adding *-ed*, the same ending for the past tense, (*played, copied, recorded*). Irregular verbs may change their vowel, (*swim/swum*), add *-en*, (*eat/eaten*) or both, (*forget/forgotten*), or may make some other change, (*cut/cut, buy/bought*). Because of the variety of forms, this is sometimes called the *-ed/-en* form of the verb. The past participle combines with the auxiliary *have* to form the perfect tenses, (*She has seen that. We have played that game*), and with *be* to form passives, (*My dog was hit by a car. They were fired*). It may also be used as an adjective to indicate an action that the noun is experiencing rather than causing, (*The injured player limped off the field*).
- **periphrastic tenses**—rather than using endings to express the various tenses, as many languages do, English uses endings on the verb only for the present and past. The other tenses are based on a combination of auxiliaries and verb endings expressing aspects of being completed (*They've bought the book.*) or continuing (*We are reading a book.*). Similar combinations have developed to express the future (*He's gonna pass the course*).
- **politeness and tense**—since the present tense is used to adamantly declare that something is true, it sometimes seems pushy in social

interactions. To seem less pushy we sometimes use past tense forms when making comments or suggesting requests in social interactions, (*Did you want a piece?*)

- **present participle**—sometimes called the **action participle**, This form of the verb created by adding *-ing* emphasizes that the action of the verb is going on. This form can be used with the verb *be* to create the progressive tenses (*We are eating a sandwich*). It also can be used as an adjective describing a characteristic that the noun is causing, (*The smiling child caught our eye*). When a present participle is used as a noun, it is called a **gerund**, (*Walking every day is good for you*).
- **present or truth tense**—present tense expresses not that the action is going on now but that it is a true condition or fact, (*I swim for exercise*).
- **tense**—indication of the time when the action of the verb occurs, now (*I think*), earlier (*I thought*), or later (*I will think*).

**Rule of thumb:** Tense sequence in discourse

1. The first sentence sets the time frame (present, past, or future) for the sentences that follow.
2. The appropriate past, present, or future tense/aspect combinations are used in the following sentences according to the notions of happened earlier, expected to happen later, or happened at that time.
3. The time frame shifts when a definite time word or phrase is used.
4. The time frame may shift to the present at anytime to indicate that something is now true or is always true.

**Some reflective activities.**

1. Name the tenses: Find the frame that surrounds the main verb in the sentences below (i.e. the verb and its auxiliary verbs). If you need to, look again at the tips for finding verbs at the end of Chapter Four. Then look at the first word in the frame and name the tense. Then give the names of any aspects that follow in their order (i.e. perfect or progressive). Be careful when naming the tenses when a modal is used or when the sentence is a passive.

- The baby has eaten all her food.
- My cat loves dog food.
- TicketMaster was selling tickets until 10 last night.
- They will have been swimming two hours by sundown.
- We'll be there tomorrow.
- They had been working on it all night.
- I'm doing my homework.
- We will have seen the parade by then.
- The rat hid in the corner.
- They had made the best possible plan.
- She may be helping us.
- The bone is buried in the yard.
- They can't be found.
- We are being served.
- They can see us.

2. Tense in sporting events: Listen to the play by play announcing of an action packed sport such as football or basketball. What tense is used to describe the action as it is taking place, the present or the present progressive? Do the announcers use the same tense when they are simply talking about the game rather than describing the actions? What does this say about our rule of thumb for using the simple present?
3. What mistakes were made in the use of tense and aspect in the following sentences?
  - \*They brung me the wrong book.
  - \*We have read it yesterday.
  - \*?The children swim in the canal right now.
  - \*The food was disgusted.
  - \*The beds will be ready when you will come.
  - \*We talked on the phone when you were arriving.
  - \*He grabs the ball and shot a three-pointer.
4. Present versus the Present Progressive. The present tense generally represents conditions that are considered true. The progressive may indicate an activity that may be true now but is only temporarily true. With this in mind which of the following indicates that you are temporarily having bad luck and which indicates you are quite comfortable with your living situation?
  - I'm living with my parents.
  - I live with my parents.

5. The two English aspects denoting completion (-ed/-en) and ongoing action (-ing) can be used with verbs independently of tense, in particular when verbs are used as adjectives. However, the resulting meanings are in such contrast that English language learners might be embarrassed or misunderstood if they don't realize the difference. The -ing or present participle form indicates that the noun being described is doing the action or causing the emotion. (*The depressing story put us all in a bad mood.*) The -ed/-en or past participle form indicates that the noun being described is experiencing or feeling the action or emotion. (*The depressed viewers turned off the television.*) Given the following verbs, make pairs of sentences that might be confusing for English language learners if they don't understand the difference.

*embarrass    confuse    disappoint    frighten    tempt    terrify*

What kind of an activity or game could you create to help cement in their mind the difference?

6. Pragmatics and tense choice. Which tense would you probably use in the following situations? You often visit a preschool so you know the children fairly well, at least by name. Today you are sitting inside watching the children Betty and Jose play in the sand outside. What tense will you use in the following scenarios?
- You report to the teacher what Betty and Jose are doing right now.
  - You make some general comments on what the Betty and Jose do when they play in the sand.

- You report on Betty and Jose's actions in the sand since you started watching them.

### **Grammar detective 5. Tenses in discourse**

Let's see if sports writers follow the rules of thumb for deciding which tense to use when they write their articles.

#### **Instructions:**

1. Find an article from the sports section of the newspaper.
2. Cut it out and attach it to a sheet of paper.
3. Start from the beginning and count the words until you come to 100.  
Continue to the end of that sentence.
4. Mark and number the main verbs with their auxiliaries in the selected section. Remember, these won't be the verbs with *-ing* or *-ed/-en* serving as adjectives or nouns. Verbs with *-ing* or *-ed/-en* have a tense only if preceded by a *be* or *have*.
5. At the bottom of the page or along the side of the paper next to the article list the verbs with their auxiliaries by number and give the name of their tenses. Remember, if a verb has a modal other than *will* (which marks the future), e.g. *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*, *would*, the modal is being used to cancel the forcefulness of the present time frame. Therefore, special conditions apply. As a general rule, the verb is still in the present time frame. (*The game may be over.* Present. *The team may have seen its last chance.* Present perfect). If the time frame indicated by a time word or the previous sentence is in the past, then the modal followed by *have*

continues that time frame. (*Jones hit the ball over the fence in what could have brought in the winning runs.* Past tense.) Remember too that a form of the verb *be* before a past participle indicates a passive. The tense is based on what precedes the *be*, e.g. *The ball was hit* (simple past), *The team has been bought* (present perfect).

6. Look at the first sentence and determine the time frame being established for the discourse (present, past, future)
7. Look at the next sentence. Does the tense selected for the next sentence revolve around the time frame established in the first sentence as expected? (i.e. for the present time frame, the following verbs might be present perfect, present progressive, simple present, future. For the past time frame, the tense possibilities would be past perfect, past progressive, simple past. For the future time frame expect future, future perfect, future progressive though verbs in subordinate clauses (i.e. after *when* or *if*) will be in the present. If the time frame changes, in other words, if the discourse was using various tenses from the past time frame and suddenly has a present tense, what triggered the change?
8. Continue through the article noting if the time frame is kept constant (e.g. in the present time frame the author uses a perfect tense to indicate an earlier time and changes the time frame to the past only when a definite time is indicated. Likewise, if the time frame is in the past the author changes to the present time frame only to indicate that the statement is a generalization that is still true.)

9. Bring your marked article to class and be prepared to discuss your findings. Do these sports writers follow the rules of thumb for deciding which tense to use?
10. How might this descriptive approach help students who are learning how to sequence tenses in their writing?

### **Teaching Ideas.**

1. **Daily Routines.** Have the students write an outline of a typical Monday according to the hours of the day. When they are finished, give the students a situation (e.g. A. You are reporting what you did last Monday. B. Today is Sunday and you are giving your plans for Monday. C. It is Monday noon and you are reporting your morning and afternoon activities but you are not specifying the times.) Have them report to a partner their activities using the appropriate tenses for the given situation.
2. **What have they been doing?** Collect pictures that show people doing actions. Demonstrate to the students how the activity goes. Show them a picture and then ask, "What have they been doing?" Students answer with sentences such as "They've been swimming." Then put the students into pairs, give each pair an action picture and have them do the same thing with each until they have used at least two action verbs apiece. Have them write the verbs they chose on a piece of paper. Collect the papers. Randomly read the verbs and have the pair whose picture represents

those verbs show their picture and say an appropriate sentence telling what they've been doing.

- 3. What's going to happen next?** Start telling the class a familiar fairy tale, such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," "Little Red Riding Hood," or "The Three Pigs." If you have a picture book version, use the book to illustrate your story. After completing the first scene or two, stop and ask them to take turns telling the class what is going to happen next, perhaps using the pictures as clues. Ask them to try out both the *gonna* and the *will* futures when it's their turn.