

Past Simple and Present Perfect

Abstract

This video shows the differences between the **Past Simple** and the **Present Perfect** by comparing them. We use the Past Simple to indicate **finished actions** in the past which do not have an effect on the present, and for **specific actions**. We use the Present Perfect to talk about **unfinished actions** which affect the present.

Script

Hello, my name is Catherine. Today we are going to talk about the Past Simple and the Present Perfect. Students often find this grammar point particularly difficult, so I will try to make it as easy as possible.

The best way to talk about the Past Simple and Present Perfect is to compare them. So let's take the following two sentences: "I cut my finger" and "I have cut my finger".

The first sentence uses the Past Simple. The Past Simple is used to indicate finished actions in the past that do not have an effect on the present. In other words now in the present my finger is ok. Instead, the second sentence uses the Present Perfect. The Present Perfect connects actions started

in the past with the present. In other words, now in the present my finger is not ok, it is bleeding! Ah!

Another reason why it's very important to be careful when you're using the Past Simple or Present Perfect is that often an incorrect usage can completely change the meaning. For example:

"Peter and Mary were married for three years".

"Peter and Mary have been married for three years".

So, let's look at the first sentence. The first sentence uses the Past Simple; are Peter and Mary still married? No, they are not. They're not married anymore. The action is finished.

Instead the second sentence uses the Present Perfect. In this case Peter and Mary are still married.

The Present Perfect functions as a bridge, it connects the past with the present.

We can use both tenses to talk about past events, but if you want to give specific information you need to use the Past Simple. Let's take for example a conversation between two friends, John and

Mary.

John asks Mary "Have you ever been to Paris?"

Mary says "Yes! I went to Paris last year".

John says "Where did you stay?", and Mary replies "I stayed near the Eiffel Tower".

John asks "Did you have fun?", and Mary replies "Yes, it was great!".

Let's compare the following two sentences:

"I have been to Paris".

"I went to Paris last year".

In the first sentence, we do not know when the action happened, but in the second sentence we clearly note that the speaker went to Paris last year. Expressions such as: yesterday, last week, in 1990, on Monday, ago, in short any expression which indicates a specific time in the past is always used with the Past simple. Whilst more vague expressions such as: since I was a child, over the years, recently, those are often used with the Present Perfect. We know that the action has happened sometime in your lifetime, but we don't know exactly when.

We also use the Present Perfect to talk about unfinished actions. Let's imagine for example that today is Wednesday; I could say the following: "I have been to the cinema once this week". We use the Present Perfect because the week is not finished yet, today it is only Wednesday, I may go to the cinema again this week.

The expressions just, yet, and already are often used with the Present Perfect. Let's take the following example. A teacher gives a test to her students; the students have 90 minutes to complete the test. After 70 minutes the teacher asks: "Has anybody finished?"

Student A says "I have already finished".

Student B: "Phew! I have just finished the test".

Instead student C: hasn't finished the test yet.

Lastly let's look at the difference between for and since. Now, it seems easy but students actually can find it difficult, especially when they translate from their native languages. For is used with periods of time: for weeks, months, years, etc. Since is used with a point in time: since Monday, since January, since 1991. Let's take the following examples:

"I have lived in London for 20 years".

"I have lived in London since 1996". or

"I have studied English for 15 years" or

"I have been studying English since I was a child".

That's all for now, bye bye!

Keys

What do we use Past Simple for?

- a) Finished actions which have an effect in the present.
- b) **Finished actions which do not have an effect in the present.**
- c) Intentions and plans.
- d) Daily routine.

In which of the following sentences the Present Perfect is used?

- a) Peter and Mary were married for three years.
- b) John goes to London every week.
- c) Sarah is sitting next to me.

- d) **Peter and Mary have been married for three years.**

When do we use the Present Perfect?

- a) To talk about our daily routine and to describe an event.
 b) **To connect past with present, and with expressions such as: since I was a child, recently, etc.**
 c) To give specific information and with expressions such as: yesterday, last week, in 1990, etc.
 d) To give suggestions and advice.

Find the correct sentence:

- a) Since is used with periods of time.
 b) Since is used with strange events.
 c) **For is used with periods of time.**
 d) For is used with a point in time.

Teaching tips

Contextualization: in order to make students understand properly when to use **Past Simple** and **Present Perfect** is important to show the differences in the usage of the two tenses. The **first activity** is based on **personalization**. In the **second activity** students are asked to **talk about periods of time** according to their real experiences, creating sentences with “for” and “since”.

1. Personalization

Students are paired up. Student A asks his/her partner if he/she or maybe someone they know has ever done something (e.g. “have you ever been to London?”) or when was the last time he/she did something (e.g. “when did you last see your sister?”). Student B answers the question and asks something to student B following the same rules.

Example

A: “Have you ever been to London?”

B: “Yes, I have. When did you last see your sister?”

A: “I saw her two weeks ago...”

Possible questions: have you ever been to..., when did you last go..., have you ever seen the film..., have you ever played..., when did you last study...

2. Talk about periods of time

Students are paired up. Student A tells student B a few sentences about his/her life using for and since (e.g. “I have studied English since 2014”/“I have been studying English for 3 years”), and vice versa. At the end, each student has to tell the class something he/she got to know from his/ her partner.

Possible topics: I have lived..., I have studied..., my parents have been married..., my mum works..., my dad plays guitar...