

verb tense and verb aspect

Tense is a term for how verbs indicate time (past, present, future and their various interrelations). **Aspect** is a term for how verbs indicate whether actions are in process, or completed.

In terms of tense, English verbs inflect only for present and past.

- Tweedy **plays** with the butterfly. (present tense)
- Tweedy **played** with the butterfly. (past tense)

But there are many other ways of expressing complex relation to time, using aspect, adverbs and adverbials, and various combinations thereof.

English has three verb aspects: simple, progressive, and perfect. We have already noted the verb-phrase rules for progressive and perfect aspect.

- Tweedy **eats** kibble. (simple aspect)
- Tweedy **is eating** kibble. (progressive aspect)
- Tweedy **has eaten** kibble. (perfect aspect)

Basically, simple aspect just states that an action occurs; progressive aspect indicates that the action is ongoing; perfect aspect indicates that the action is over with. Note that the progressive is formed with *be* + the -ing participle; the perfect is formed with *have* + the -ed participle. (In fact, if you are unsure what the -ed participle of a given verb is, a good way to produce it is to think how you would use the verb in the perfect aspect.)

The examples above are all present tense; all three aspects can be past tense.

- Tweedy **ate** Fancy Feast. (simple past)
- Tweedy **was eating** Fancy Feast. (past progressive)
- Tweedy **had eaten** Fancy Feast. (past perfect)

Perfect and progressive aspects can be combined, in either tense. Per the VP rule VP → [modal] [AUX perfect have] [AUX progressive be] [AUX passive be] main verb the perfect auxiliary *have* comes first, showing tense; then the progressive auxiliary *be* in its -ed participle form *been*; then the main verb in its -ing participle form.

- Tweedy **has been eating** cat chow. (present perfect progressive)
- Tweedy **had been eating** cat chow. (past perfect progressive)

The temporal sequence of these tenses and aspects - their relation to time - gets complicated, but is basically logical. A progressive action continues; a perfect action is

over. A perfect progressive action was going on at some point in the past; a past perfect progressive action was going on but was already over by the past moment we're talking about. These nuances of time can be extremely important in legal, business, and literary writing.

Logical as they are, though, relations of tense and aspect are not mechanical. The most striking thing about English, for many adult learners, is that the simple present tense isn't used to describe what someone's doing right now. Instead, English uses the present tense in the progressive aspect.

Let's say someone calls you while you're in your car, but being a good driver, you want to get them off the phone quickly. You do not tell them

- *I drive now

you tell them

- I am driving now

It makes perfect sense to use the progressive aspect for something you are doing right now - notice that I just used the progressive aspect to talk about "doing" something. You are in the process of doing it.

Less clear to many learners may be the way we use the simple present to describe not immediate present action, but habitual action. How do you get to campus? "I drive a few miles on I-30." At the moment you express that action in the present tense, you are unlikely to be driving at all. But I-30 is how you currently get there on a regular basis, and in standard English that is expressed by the simple present tense.

auxiliary-like forms

Oxford calls two-word verbs that are used with a following main verb "auxiliary-like." Two of the most common are used to show tense: *used to* for habitual past action that is over, and *be going to* for future action.

- Tweedy **used to eat** kitten chow. (i.e. he did that for a while, but doesn't anymore)
- Tweedy **is going to eat** senior chow. (in future)

future tense

English does not have future-tense inflections. Of course, we talk about the future; but future tense in English is not embedded in the verb. It has to be delivered via phrases. Think of the range of ways we express how something is going to occur in the future:

- Tweedy **is going to eat** senior chow. (future auxiliary)
- Tweedy **will see** the vet. (modal)
- Tweedy **ought to see** the vet. (modal-like *ought to*)
- Tweedy **sees** the vet on Friday. (simple present with adverbial)
- Tweedy **is seeing** the vet on Friday. (present progressive with adverbial)