

Commenting on developments in the English language

Present perfect or past simple? April 9, 2014

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by [Kate Woodford](#)

Present perfect or past simple?

This is a tricky area of the English language for low-level learners, so let's look again at the rules.

When we start studying English, we learn that to talk about an action that started and finished in the past, we use the past simple tense, (for regular verbs, the base verb + -ed):

*I **finished** the course a month ago.*

*I **cooked** dinner.*

*We **saw** Jamie yesterday.*

Notice that we naturally use time expressions with the past simple – *yesterday*, *a month ago*, *2005*, etc. Remember that when we use one of these words or phrases, we *do not* use the present perfect tense:

~~*I've been to the USA in 2008.*~~

I went to the USA in 2008.

So when do we use the present perfect tense to talk about past events? (The present perfect is the verb *have* + the past participle of a verb.) There are a number of uses, but the one thing that joins them all together is that they in some way relate the past to the present. Let's look at some examples:

1 *I've **lived** here since 2006.*

2 *I'm not hungry, thanks – I've already **had** dinner.*

3 *I've **been** to New York.*

4 *I've **seen** that film four times.*

5 *Rebecca **has had** a baby girl.*

Example 1

The speaker is talking about a period of time in the past *right up until* the present. The present perfect here expresses the way in which the action started in the past, but *did not finish* in the past.

Example 2

The action of having dinner was in the past, but there is an effect *on the present* – the speaker is not now hungry. Here, the present perfect describes a past event that has a result now.

Example 3

The speaker means that at some point *in the whole of their life*, (from when they were born right up until the present), they went to New York. They do not tell us exactly when they went. This is an important use of the present perfect.

Example 4

As with Example 3, the time period here is the past *right up until* the present. Note here the use of the present perfect for talking about *how many times* something has happened *until now*.

Example 5

Here, the speaker uses the present perfect to say what has *just* happened – to announce news. The action is in the past, but it is the *very recent past* and the effects of the action are still being experienced now. (Remember that when the speaker has announced the news and they then give more information about the event, they usually change to the past simple tense):

*Rebecca **has had** a baby boy! He **was born** at three o'clock yesterday. It all **went** really well, apparently.*

It is worth noting that American speakers of English use the present perfect less than British speakers to talk about a past event with a present result (Example 2):

(British)

*I've **hurt** my leg and I can't walk properly.*

(American)

*I've **hurt** my leg and I can't walk properly. or I **hurt** my leg and I can't walk properly.*

Another difference is that in British English, the words *just*, *yet* and *already* are often used with the present perfect tense. In American English, these words are also used with the past simple tense.

(British)

*I've **just seen** him.*

***Have you called** your mother **yet**?*

*I've **already invited** him.*

(American)

*I **just saw** him or I've **just seen** him.*

***Did you call** your mother **yet**? or **Have you called** your mother **yet**?*

*I **already invited** him or I've **already invited** him.*

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by [GHULAM MURTAZA](#) April 9, 2014 at 4:48 pm

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Interesting education so pls update us. Thank you.

by [Elias](#) April 9, 2014 at 5:23 pm

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thanks so much for your explanation . it is so clear

by [Abdulfatah](#) April 9, 2014 at 5:45 pm

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thanks a lot.i want more lessons on time and tense.kindly give lessons for voice.

by [md. mumtaz ali](#) April 9, 2014 at 6:18 pm

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thank , i have got a lot of learning

by [khin](#) April 10, 2014 at 8:53 am

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Having spent many years learning other languages myself, I would like to suggest a simple tip: the more you read, the more you learn. The more familiar you become with the patterns of a language, from reading, the easier it becomes to follow them in speaking.

Also, as a native speaker in a very cosmopolitan city (New York), I can tell you that most of us are tolerant of the occasional error. Try your best and, I know from personal observation, at least six New Yorkers will try to help you.

by [gothamguide](#) April 10, 2014 at 9:03 am

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Thank you for your interesting lesson.

[by S Sureshkumar](#) April 10, 2014 at 3:10 pm

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Thank you for the lesson, that part was always kind of difficult for me!

[by Laura Rodriguez](#) April 12, 2014 at 6:46 pm

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than you so much

[by arumugam](#) April 13, 2014 at 4:33 pm

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VERY GOOD LESSON

[by Hamada Helal](#) April 14, 2014 at 3:16 am

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it is a tailor made session for the confusions people have with these two structures . thanks a ton .

[by Nandan](#) April 16, 2014 at 3:54 pm

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Thank you very much for all the kind comments. It's very encouraging to hear that you found the blog useful.

[by Cambridge Words](#) April 17, 2014 at 10:50 am

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Thank you for your good presentation, I really enjoy it.

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good lesson dear

[by montytys](#) April 21, 2014 at 11:38 am

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..a very practical way of explaining. thanks.

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Useful and interesting lesson..

[by Birgit Mathiasen](#) June 18, 2014 at 12:18 pm

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