PRESENT PERFECT VS. PAST SIMPLE

PAST SIMPLE

Form:

\[ \text{infinitive + -ed} \]

(Irregular forms vary considerably in their past form. Learn the list!)

Uses:

A) It is used for actions \textit{completed} in the past at a \textit{definite time}. It is therefore used:

1. for a past action when the time is given:
   
   e.g. \textit{I met him yesterday.}
   
   e.g. \textit{Pasteur died in 1895.}

2. or when the time is asked about:
   
   e.g. \textit{When did you meet him?}

3. or when the action clearly took place at a definite time even though this time is not mentioned:
   
   e.g. \textit{The train was ten minutes late.}
   
   e.g. \textit{How did you get your present job?}
   
   e.g. \textit{I bought this car in Montreal.}

4. Sometimes the time becomes definite as a result of a question and answer in the present perfect:
   
   e.g. \textit{Where have you been? – I’ve been to the opera. – Did you enjoy it?}
   
   e.g. \textit{Have you ever been to Australia? – Yes, I have. – When did you go?}
B) The simple past tense is used for an action whose time is not given but which

a) occupied a period of time now terminated:
   e.g. He worked in that bank for four years. (but he doesn’t work there now)
   e.g. She lived in Rome for a long time. (but she’s not living there now)
   or
b) occurred at a moment in a period of time now terminated:
   e.g. My grandmother once saw Queen Victoria.
   e.g. Did you ever hear Maria Callas sing?

C) The simple past tense is also used for a past habit:
   e.g. He always carried an umbrella.
   e.g. They never drank wine.

**PRESENT PERFECT**

Form:

- have/has + past participle

Uses:

1. An action that began in the past and continues until the present:
   e.g. I have lived in London for two years. (=I still live in London)
   e.g. How long have you been there? (=You are still there)

2. For recent actions when time is not mentioned:
   e.g. I have read the instructions but I don’t understand them.
   e.g. I’ve already had dinner.
   e.g. Have you had breakfast? – No, I haven’t had it yet.
3. Recent actions in the present perfect often have results in the present:
   e.g. Tom has had a bad car crash. (=He’s probably still in hospital)
   e.g. The lift has broken down. (=We have to use the stairs)
   e.g. I have washed the car. (=It looks lovely)
   * But actions expressed by the simple past without a time expression do not
   normally have results in the present:
   e.g. Tom had a bad car crash. (=but he’s probably out of hospital now)
   e.g. The lift broke down. (=but it’s probably working again now)
   e.g. I washed the car. (=but it may be dirty again now)

4. An action that has happened very recently in time. In this case, we use ‘just’:
   e.g. The plane has just taken off.
   e.g. He has just gone out. (=He went out a few minutes ago)

5. Actions that occur further back in the past, provided that the connection with
   the present is still maintained:
   e.g. I have seen wolves in that forest (=it is still possible to see them)
   e.g. John Smith has written a number of short stories (=he’s still alive
        and can write more)
   But if the wolves have been killed and John Smith is dead we would say:
   e.g. I saw wolves in that forest.
   e.g. John Smith wrote a number of short stories.

**COMMON EXPRESSIONS WITH PRESENT PERFECT:**

Ever, never, just, yet, already, recently, lately, how long...?, since, for

Actions expressed by the present perfect + yet usually have results in the present:
   e.g. He hasn’t come yet. (=so we are still waiting for him)

**OTHER EXAMPLES:**

e.g. The plane has just taken off.
e.g. How long have you studied for the test?

e.g. How long have you lived here?

e.g. I have taken pictures of famous actors for two years.

e.g. We have recently moved home.

e.g. She has been here since six o’clock (=and is still here)

Main differences between present perfect and past simple:

Past Simple:
It indicates what happened (completed action) at a specific point in the past.

   e.g. Did you see the match last night?

Present Perfect:
Past action where no specific time is mentioned:

   e.g. I’ve been to Paris twice.

There is a connection with the present:

   e.g. I’ve worked here for two years. (=I still work here).
   
   But:
   
   e.g. I worked here for two years. (=I don’t work here any more)

Example of contrast between Past Simple and Present Perfect:

   e.g. I put an advert in the newspaper last Monday, but no one has phoned yet.

Compare:

   e.g. I have read the instructions but I don’t understand them.

   e.g. I read the instructions last night.