



Basic Grammar Unit 4

These materials are only suitable for use in the Basic Grammar class. There is some information, there are some tasks, but they only make sense when used as the basis for thinking and discussing in class. The content of each unit has been drawn from a variety of sources: from various grammar books and my own ideas and teaching experience. At the beginning of the term I hand out a bibliography with details of all the grammar books I have drawn on. These books are indicated only with an abbreviation here.

Unit 4 Talking about the past and the present.

This unit looks at how we use the present perfect and the simple past. Basically, they express two different ways of looking at the past.

Task (1)

First of all, test yourselves. Decide quickly whether you would put in a present perfect or a simple past.

(1) Since his sudden death John Lennon a peace movement hero - for some people. (become)

(2) Pennsylvania by William Penn. (be founded)

(3) We living room walls pink and orange and it looks really nice. (paint)

(4) This picture by Picasso. (be painted)

(5) That's a habit with him. He a pint of milk a day. (drink, always)

(6) Once he only a shopkeeper. Now he's a company director.
(be)

(7) I twice recently. (see)

(8) Dammit! I my finger. (cut)

(9) Where my glasses this time? (I, put)

(10) Who this essay? It's really good, but I can't read the name on it. (write)

(11) Although he lived in India for many years he
Delhi. (visit, never)

(12) This is the first time I so early. (waken up)

(13) I her for ages. I suppose she's busy working for her exams. (see, not)

and decide which of the following are possible:

- (1) Jan has written novels and poems
- (2) Jan wrote novels and poems
- (3) Jan has written a novel and a poem
- (4) Jan wrote a novel and a poem
- (5) Jan has written that novel
- (6) Jan wrote that novel

Now compare your answers with those of your neighbours. Can you justify your choices?

Task (2)

Text: The Fires of Intolerance

Task (3) We will be completing this diagram in class, to make sense out of it!

Past

Present

When our attention is focused on a period of time leading up to the present, we use the present perfect.

When our attention is focused on a period of time completed in the past, we use the simple past.

Single events

(Talking about a single event in a period up to now : present perfect)
I've seen the film "Lola rennt".
Her car has broken down.

(Talking about a single event at a definite past time in the completed past: simple past)
I saw the film "Lola rennt".
My car broke down.

States or repeated events, like Habits, which amount to states

(Talking about a state leading up to now, or a series of events in a period leading up to now: present perfect)
I've known her for years.
We've worked together for years.
I've always got up late.
I've seen the film lots of times.

(Talking about a state completed in the past or a series of events in completed past time: simple past)
I knew her for years.
I always got up late.
I saw the film lots of times.

Draw a picture of a very unhappy student here :-)

Unhappy student: OK, ok but how do I know whether “our attention is focused“ on a period of time completed in the past, or on a period of time leading up to the present???????? How do I know when to say “I’ve seen ‘Lola rennt’ or “I saw ‘Lola rennt’”?????? Surely the objective event is the same? The film was on TV last Saturday at 8 pm – I don’t understand the examples!!!!

Teacher: That’s the problem with examples like that – the context is missing. Obviously, in reality, sentences have a context. Maybe the context is still in your head, it hasn’t been expressed yet, or maybe there is a spoken or written text around the sentence. It is the context, in its widest sense, which decides the form of expression.

Rules and Guidelines:

The following are some rules and guidelines. The rules mean that you have no choice in the form you use; the guidelines help you choose appropriately.

- When to use the **simple past**:

(1) Where there is explicit reference in the sentence itself to finished past time, e.g. yesterday, a moment ago, when I was in Canada, as a child, then you have no choice: the simple past must be used.

I saw “Braveheart”	last year.
I saw “Braveheart” lots of times	when it came to Konstanz.
Her computer crashed	yesterday.

(2) Where there is no explicit reference in the sentence to finished past time, there may be explicit reference within the text. Here again you have no choice: the simple past must be used.

We had a great time in Wales last year – except the car broke down and we ended up hitch-hiking.

- (3) Where there is no explicit reference in the sentence or in the text to past time, a definite past time may still be implied by the context, again requiring the use of the simple past.

Scene: Two friends meet after the holidays. The one knows that the other was planning to go to France.

- Hi Jan. You look great. Did you have a good time?
- Yes, it was really great. The weather was fantastic all the time, and the food was terrific.

The friend's question is understood as "Did you have a good time when you were on holiday in France?" (The simple past functions on the same principle as indexical "the" in "Look, there's the moon." It's not necessary to specify the definite moon by saying "Look, there's the moon that we earthlings can usually see in the sky at night ...")

- When to use the **present perfect**:

- (4) Where there is explicit reference in the text to a period of time leading up to now e.g. in the last few years, since the beginning of semester, for 10 years now, you have no choice: the present perfect must be used.

I've lived in Konstanz for years now.
He's been at the university since 1999.

- (5) Where there is "just" with the meaning of "gerade" as in "Ich habe es gerade gemacht" the present perfect is generally used in British English.

Stop nagging, I've just done it!

- (6) Where there is the idea of resultative past, i.e. the result of the event is still operative at the present time, you use the present perfect. This meaning is clearest with transitional event verbs (e.g. arrive, die, fall, land, leave, lose, stop) which denote the switch from one state to another.

The taxi has arrived (= the taxi is here now)
My computer has crashed (= it is not working, it needs repairs now)
I've recovered from the flu (= I'm well now)

Note how it is possible to paraphrase the original with an expression of present time.

- (7) Similarly, when attention is focused more on present result than on past event the present perfect is used.

Hence the question “Have you seen Braveheart” typically starts off a topic of conversation. It wants to establish simply Yes or No before the conversation goes on. It does not have a specific past time in mind, but time up to now.

Recap:

With a state or habit: the present perfect expresses a continuation up to the present;

the simple past expresses a state or habit completed in past time.

With an event : the present perfect focuses on the present result, and on indefinite, unspecified time; the speaker’s time frame is time-up-to-now;

the simple past focuses on definite past time; the speaker’s time frame is a finished past period.

Task (4)

We are going to create our own diagram in class which consists of branching trees of choices (simple past/present perfect) and represents all that you now know about the topic – and we’ll add some new ideas.

Task (5) Can you translate these into real English. Words (in brackets) are only meant as context.

1. Seit 7 Jahren leben sie im Ausland.
2. (Das mache ich grundsätzlich nicht mehr.) Ich habe es aber als junger Lehrer oft gemacht.
3. Ich habe den Präsidenten gerade gesehen!
4. Ich habe die Bücher leider noch nicht lesen können.
5. Waren Sie schon oft da?
6. Waren Sie schon mal in Schottland?
7. (Das kann ich schon ganz gut.) Ich habe ziemlich viel geübt.
8. Das ist das erste Mal, dass ich so was sehe!
9. Ich arbeite seit Wochen daran.
10. Ich habe erst gestern angefangen.

Task (6)

In groups, choose one of the following topics and write a letter, not too serious ... but using as many of the adverbials below as you possibly can, with the correct tense.

Topics:

- a) An application for a holiday job at a summer camp, looking after 12 year-olds
- b) A letter to the father of an English boy/girl you met on holiday, asking for permission to marry
- c) A letter to a travel agency complaining about the package tour you booked with them
- d) A letter to a magistrate excusing yourself for a parking offence

Adverbials:

before that
recently
first
last week
just
already
on 5th May
last year
never
then

often
10 days ago
for 6 years
last Christmas
for ever and ever ...
at the turn of the century
not long ago
since last July
in the middle of the night