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# BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

## 6 Minute Grammar

### Narrative tenses



*This is not a word-for-word transcript*

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**Finn**

Hello. Welcome to 6 Minute Grammar with me, Finn.

**Catherine**

And me, Catherine. Hello.

**Finn**

In today's programme we're talking about narrative tenses ...

**Catherine**

Yes, narrative tenses. That means the past simple tense, the past continuous, the past perfect and the past perfect continuous.

**Finn**

Yes, we use these tenses to describe events that happened in the past, and for telling stories.

**Catherine**

We'll explain when to use each tense ...

**Finn**

...we'll give you lots of examples...

**Catherine**

...and there'll be quiz at the end of the show, so listen carefully! Let's begin with the past simple. We use the past simple tense for events and action that started and finished in the past. Here's Mike with our first example.

**Mike**

I had a terrible day last Monday! It all started when I woke up late.

**Catherine**

So those three verbs: **had**, **started** and **woke up**, are all in the past simple, because they describe events which started and finished in the past.

**Finn**

Now if Mike wants to describe the background to his story, or to talk about things that started before his story started, and continued through his story, he can use the past continuous tense, like this:

**Mike**

It all started when I woke up late. I opened the curtains. It was raining and the traffic was moving very slowly.

**Catherine**

So that's **it was raining** and **the traffic was moving**, in the past continuous, to set the scene and describe past activities.

**Finn**

We'll come back to the past continuous a little later on, but first, let's look at two more tenses. First, the past perfect. Mike.

**Mike**

When I looked at my phone, I realised I had slept through the alarm!

**Finn**

So, Mike used the past perfect **I had slept** with the past simple **when I looked** and another past simple **I realised** to show one past action happened before another one.

**Catherine**

So, first, Mike slept through his alarm, then he looked at his watch and realised. Mike swaps the order of events in his sentence, and uses the past perfect tense to signal that the second thing he talks about actually happened first. One more time please Mike?

**Mike**

When I looked at my phone, I realised I had slept through the alarm!

**Catherine**

The past perfect continuous works in pretty much the same way, but this time for activities that continued for a length of time.

**Mike**

When I looked at my phone, I realised I had slept through the alarm. I had been sleeping like a log!

**Finn**

Mike **had been sleeping** like a log. A past activity that continued for a length of time, before another past event. So we use a range of tenses to build up a story about past events. Let's demonstrate this now. Catherine, tell me something that happened to you today ...

**Catherine**

Ok, Finn. Well, funnily enough, while I was walking to work this morning, I saw a monkey in a tree.

**Finn**

You never did.

**Catherine**

I did.

**Finn**

I don't believe you.

**Catherine**

It's true.

**Finn**

OK. Catherine combined the past continuous **I was walking** with the past simple **I saw**.

**Catherine**

That's right, and I did that to show that one action happened whilst another one was still happening.

**Finn**

For interrupted activities, in other words. So, Catherine, what happened next?

**Catherine**

Well, a man told me that the monkey had chased a cat up a tree.

**Finn**

Really?

**Catherine**

Yeah.

**Finn**

Right. So that's past perfect to say what happened earlier in the past.

**Catherine**

Exactly.

**Finn**

But did it really happen, Catherine? I'm not sure about this.

**Catherine**

No.

**Finn**

Yes. OK. So Catherine, what was a monkey doing in a busy London street?

**Catherine**

Well ... a film crew had been making an advert when the monkey spotted a cat and chased it up the tree.

**Finn**

I really don't believe this, but there were two more examples of the past simple **spotted** and **chased** with the past perfect continuous **had been making**.

**IDENT**

You're listening to BBC Learning English.

**Finn**

We're talking about narrative tenses.

**Catherine**

Time for a quiz. Fill the gaps in this short story. Number 1. Inspector Jones was called to a robbery. But by the time he arrived, the thief... a) went or b) had gone.

**Finn**

It's b) had gone.

**Catherine**

That's right. Number two. While he [sfx beep] in the garden, Inspector Jones noticed an open window and two sets of tiny footprints. Is it a) was looking b) had looked?

**Finn**

It's a) was looking.

**Catherine**

That's right. Number three. When Inspector Jones looked up, he [sfx beep] who had stolen the ring. Is it a) was seeing or b) saw?

**Finn**

And this one is b) saw. And I think I know who the thieves were – it must be that cat and monkey who have got into this story now!

**Catherine**

Really! Well done, Finn Sherlock. And well done to you if you got those right. And check out our website at [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com) for more information about on tenses. Join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar.

**Both**

Bye.

**STING**