
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Grammar

Past perfect



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Rob

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

Catherine

And me, Catherine. Hello.

Rob

Today we're talking about the past perfect tense.

Catherine

Yes, the past perfect. When we want to talk about two things that happened at different times in the past, we can use the past perfect tense – that's a subject with **had** plus the **past participle**. And here's Harry with our first example:

Harry

Mary rang John's doorbell at 8.15 yesterday, but John had gone to work.

Catherine

And let's hear that again.

Harry

Mary rang John's doorbell at 8.15 yesterday, but John had gone to work.

Rob

Thanks Harry. Now we could put these two events in the past simple tense, something like this:

Harry

John went to work. Then Mary rang John's doorbell.

Rob

And once again Harry.

Harry

John went to work. Then Mary rang John's doorbell.

Catherine

Or, we can change the order of events in the sentence, and use the past perfect – that's **had** with a **past participle** – to show which event actually happened first.

Harry

Mary rang John's doorbell at 8.15 yesterday, but John had gone to work.

Catherine

And once again.

Harry

Mary rang John's doorbell at 8.15 yesterday, but John had gone to work.

Rob

And here, the past perfect in **John had gone** shows that this happened before the past simple phrase **Mary rang John's doorbell**. So we have: **Mary rang John's doorbell at 8.15 yesterday, but John had gone to work.**

Catherine

Exactly. Now, let's look at some more examples.

Harry

I was pleased when I got a text from Jim, because I'd lost his number.

Rob

Let's hear that again.

Harry

I was pleased when I got a text from Jim, because I'd lost his number.

Catherine

So we've got two past events. First, Harry lost Jim's number; then he got his text. But in Harry's sentence, the event that happened first in time is mentioned second in the sentence.

Rob

So he uses the past perfect – **I'd lost his number** – to show that the second event he mentions, actually happened first.

Harry

I was pleased when I got a text from Jim, because I'd lost his number.

Rob

Now in spoken English, the past perfect can sometimes be difficult to hear.

Catherine

Yes that's true - in our example just now, the two words **I had** are shortened to **I'd**. I'd lost his number.

Rob

So **had** is shortened to just a /d/ sound. Listen out for the short /d/ sound in this next example:

Harry

When Mrs Brown opened the washing machine she realised she'd washed her phone.

Rob

And again.

Harry

When Mrs Brown opened the washing machine she realised she'd washed her phone.

Catherine

Did you catch that?

Rob

First, Mrs Brown washed her phone in the washing machine. Then she opened the washing machine. Then she realised... She'd washed her phone!

Catherine

Yes, and the phrase **she had washed** is shortened to **she'd washed**. One more time please Harry.

Harry

When Mrs Brown opened the washing machine she realised she'd washed her phone.

Rob

Oops – that's an expensive mistake. Poor Mrs Brown!

Catherine

Yeah, she won't do that again!

IDENT

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Catherine

Now for a quiz. I'm going to say some sentences and, as you listen, try to decide what happened first, and what happened second. Here's the first one. **I woke up late because I'd forgotten to set the alarm.**

Rob

OK, so the past perfect here is **I'd forgotten**, and the order of events was: first, I forgot to set the alarm, and second, I woke up late. Here it is again.

Harry

I woke up late because I'd forgotten to set the alarm.

Catherine

Great. Another one: **I hadn't brought a towel, so I couldn't have a shower.**

Rob

How embarrassing. OK, and we've got the negative of had, which is **hadn't**. So first, I didn't bring a towel, and second, I couldn't have a shower. Here it is again.

Harry

I hadn't brought a towel, so I couldn't have a shower.

Catherine

Good. And for the last one: **When they got to the station, they realised they'd left the tickets at home.**

Rob

This one has three events: first, they left the tickets at home. Second, they got to the station. And third, they realised that the tickets were at home.

Catherine

Yes and the past perfect phrase **they had left**, was shortened to **they'd left** – which helps us show that order.

Harry

When they got to the station, they realised they'd left the tickets at home.

Rob

Now, a mistake people sometimes make with the past perfect is: they use it too much, or they use it just because they are talking about something that happened a long time ago. Such as...

Harry

Jackie had gone to a football match last month.

Catherine

Yes – there's only one past event here, so we probably just need the past simple tense:

Harry

Jackie went to a football match last month.

Rob

So that's the past perfect. It's made of **had** plus the **past participle** and we mainly use it to talk about a past event that happened before another past event.

Catherine

There's more about this on our website at bbclearningenglish.com. Join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar.

All

Bye.