

LUC WRITING CENTER – “SIMPLE TENSES IN ENGLISH”

The Rules:

The **simple tenses** tend to be the most **basic** forms of a verb. With the exception of the simple future will, the simple tenses *do not take a helping (also called modal or auxiliary) verb*.

Simple Tenses	Use this tense when describing actions that occur at a particular time.	Example Verb Form
Simple Present	Describes events that usually, habitually, and always exist. Example: <i>The water in Lake Michigan is cold.</i>	I eat
Simple Past	Describes events that were completed in the past. Example: <i>Last summer I walked to Lake Michigan.</i>	I ate
Simple Future	Describes events that will occur at a particular time in the future. Example: <i>Next summer I will swim in Florida.</i>	I will eat

Other common uses of the simple tenses:

Simple present:

1. Used to state **general statements of fact and general truths**. Example: *The Chicago Cubs are an excellent baseball team.* (although this statement could be interpreted as an opinion, here the simple present “are” indicates that the speaker means it as a *statement of truth or fact*.)

2. Used to express **future time** when the sentence describes an event on a definite schedule or timetable. This meaning is usually only used with certain verbs, such as *to begin, to end, to open, to close, to start, to finish, to arrive, and to leave*. Example: *Tomorrow, the library opens at 7 o'clock in the morning.* (the present tense “opens” indicates that the library’s hours are part of a set schedule, and that its opening is a regular event; the statement thus implies that *this action will also happen tomorrow*).

3. Also can be used to **express future time** in conjunction with the word “when” and the simple future. These sentences use the following pattern: “When” + simple present clause + simple future clause. Example: *She will be coming around the mountain when she comes.* (Here, the clause “when she comes” has a future meaning because *her coming will happen at the same time as her movement around the mountain*.)

Simple past:

Usually used in conjunction with a **specific mention of time**, such as *yesterday or last week*. Example: *Last semester, the students submitted the article to the scholarly journal, but the article wasn’t formally accepted until last week.*

LUC WRITING CENTER – “SIMPLE TENSES IN ENGLISH”

2. If the sentence uses a dependent clause with “when,” and *both clauses use the simple past*, then the “when” clause **happened first**.

Example: *When I finished giving my speech to the class, the students clapped politely.* (here the use of **when** indicates that the speaker finished talking first, and then everyone applauded; *both events happened in the past.*)

One Reason Why These Rules Can Be Confusing:

The use of the simple present to convey a future meaning *can seem counterintuitive or backwards*. This sense may be easier to understand if you think of this meaning *as an extension of the statement of fact, habit, or truth*.

Practice:

Complete the following sentences *with a correct form of the verb in parentheses*.

1. Artichokes _____ (to be) unquestionably delicious vegetables.
2. When we _____ (to cross) the border, the guards _____ (to check) our passports and visas.
3. When we _____ (to finish) our experiment, we _____ (to discover) that our original hypotheses was incorrect.
4. Lightning _____ (to strike) and _____ (to kill) the apple tree last month.
5. We _____ (to move) out of the dorms tomorrow.

Further Resources:

- [“Active Verb Tenses”](#) (Purdue Owl)
- [“Verb Tense Consistency”](#) (Purdue Owl)

These materials were partially adapted from:

Understanding and Using English Grammar. 4th ed. Ed. Betty S. Azar and Stacy A. Hagen. Pearson Longman, 2009.

LUC Writing Center Curriculum, Brandiann Molby and Lydia Craig 2017 ©