

English Grammar Secrets

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Caroline Brown Pearson Brown

Present continuous

The present continuous is used to talk about present situations which we see as short-term or temporary. We use the present simple to talk about present situations which we see as long-term or permanent.

In these examples, the action is taking place at the time of speaking.

- It's raining.
- Who is Kate talking to on the phone?
- Look, somebody is trying to steal that man's wallet.
- I'm not looking. My eyes are closed tightly.

In these examples, the action is true at the present time but we don't think it will be true in the long term.

- I'm looking for a new apartment.
- He's thinking about leaving his job.
- They're considering making an appeal against the judgment.
- Are you getting enough sleep?

In these examples, the action is at a definite point in the future and it has already been arranged.

- I'm meeting her at 6.30.
- They aren't arriving until Tuesday.
- We are having a special dinner at a top restaurant for all the senior managers.
- Isn't he coming to the dinner?

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Present simple

We use the present simple to talk about actions we see as long term or permanent. It is a very common and very important tense.

Here, we are talking about regular actions or events.

- They drive to the office every day.
- She doesn't come here very often.
- The news usually starts at 6.00 every evening.
- Do you usually have bacon and eggs for breakfast?

Here, we are talking about facts.

- We have two children.
- Water freezes at 0° C or 32° F.
- What does this expression mean?
- The Thames flows through London.

Here, we are talking about future facts, usually found in a timetable or a chart.

- Christmas Day falls on a Monday this year.
- The plane leaves at 5.00 tomorrow morning.
- Ramadan doesn't start for another 3 weeks.
- Does the class begin at 10 or 11 this week?

Here, we are talking about our thoughts and feelings at the time of speaking. Although these feelings can be short-term, we use the present simple and not the present continuous.

- They don't ever agree with us.
- I think you are right.
- She doesn't want you to do it.
- Do you understand what I am trying to say.

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Present simple or continuous

The Present Simple is used for:

- regular actions or events
He plays tennis most weekends.
- facts
The sun rises in the east.
- facts known about the future
We leave at 8.30 next Monday
- thoughts and feelings about the time of speaking
I don't feel very well.

The Present Continuous is used for:

- the time of speaking ('now')
Shh, I'm trying to hear what they are saying .
- things which are true at the moment but not always
We're looking for a new flat.
- present plans for the future
We're having dinner with them next week .

Look at these examples :

- I don't usually have cereals for breakfast but I'm having some this morning because there is nothing else.
- I often cycle to work but I'm taking the car this morning because it's raining very hard.
- I'm thinking about having my hair cut short but I don't think my husband will be very happy about it.
- My parents live in Washington but I'm just visiting.

Note how, in all these examples, we use the present continuous to talk about events which are temporary/limited in time and the present simple to talk about events which are habits/permanent.

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Past simple

We use the past simple to talk about actions and states which we see as completed in the past.

We can use it to talk about a specific point in time.

- She came back last Friday.
- I saw her in the street.
- They didn't agree to the deal.

It can also be used to talk about a period of time.

- She lived in Tokyo for seven years.
- They were in London from Monday to Thursday of last week.
- When I was living in New York, I went to all the art exhibitions I could.

You will often find the past simple used with time expressions such as these:

- Yesterday
- three weeks ago
- last year
- in 2002
- from March to June
- for a long time
- for 6 weeks
- in the 1980s
- in the last century
- in the past

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Past continuous

We use the past simple to talk about actions and states which we see as completed in the past.

We can use it to talk about a specific point in time.

We use the past continuous to talk about past events which went on for a period of time.

We use it when we want to emphasize the continuing process of an activity or the period of that activity. (If we just want to talk about the past event as a simple fact, we use the past simple.)

- While I was driving home, Peter was trying desperately to contact me.
- Were you expecting any visitors?
- Sorry, were you sleeping?
- I was just making some coffee.
- I was thinking about him last night.
- In the 1990s few people were using mobile phones.

We often use it to describe a "background action" when something else happened.

- I was walking in the street when I suddenly fell over.
- She was talking to me on the phone and it suddenly went dead.
- They were still waiting for the plane when I spoke to them.
- The company was declining rapidly before he took charge.
- We were just talking about it before you arrived.
- I was making a presentation in front of 500 people when the microphone stopped working.

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Past simple or continuous

Both the past simple and the past continuous refer to completed actions in the past.

Most of the time when we are talking about such actions, we use the past simple. This is by far the most common way of talking about the past.

- I lived there for 6 years.
- I only found out a few moments ago.
- I asked her but she didn't know anything.
- The company made 100 people redundant last year.

Only use the past continuous when you want to emphasize the continuity of the action.

- Everybody was talking about it all evening.
- They were really trying hard but couldn't do it.
- I was thinking about you the other day.
- Were you expecting that to happen?

When we use these two forms in the same sentence, we use the past continuous to talk about the "background action" and the past simple to talk about the shorter completed action.

- It was raining hard when we left the building.
- I was reading the report when you rang.
- He was going out to lunch when I saw him.
- The company was doing well when I last visited it.

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Irregular verbs

All new verbs in English are regular.

- I photocopied the report.
- She faxed it to me.
- They emailed everybody about it.
- I googled my name and got more than 20 000 responses.

There are approximately 180 irregular verbs. You don't need to learn all of them because some of these are very rare but many others are very useful and you do need to know them.

What's the easiest way to learn them? Some people think you should learn a list 'by heart'. Others think you should not learn them at all – you will just gradually acquire them over time.

One useful method is to note down new irregular verbs as you meet them. It is useful to write these verbs (or any vocabulary you want to learn) in sentences and learn those rather than the individual word.

Which is easier to learn?

- stick stuck stuck
- I stuck the photo into my album.

Another technique is to classify the irregular verbs into 4 categories.

1. All forms the same

- set set set
- cost cost cost

2. Similar sound groups

- beat beat beaten
- eat ate eaten
- blow blew blown
- throw threw thrown
- drink drank drunk
- sing sang sung
- speak spoke spoken
- wake woke woken

3. The second and third forms are the same.

- bend bent bent
- sleep slept slept
- spend spent spent
- bring brought brought
- buy bought bought
- teach taught taught
- have had had
- pay paid paid
- say said said

4. The "unclassifiabls"

- come came come
- do did done
- go went gone
- show showed show

As you meet new irregular verbs, try to decide in which category they fall.

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Present perfect

(Please note that British and American English have different rules for the use of this tense. The explanation and exercises here refer to British English. In American English, it is often acceptable to use the past simple in some of these examples.)

We use the present perfect when we want to look back from the present to the past.

We can use it to look back on the recent past.

- I've broken my watch so I don't know what time it is.
- They have cancelled the meeting.
- She's taken my copy. I don't have one.
- The sales team has doubled its turnover.

When we look back on the recent past, we often use the words 'just' 'already' or the word 'yet' (in negatives and questions only).

- We've already talked about that.
- She hasn't arrived yet.
- I've just done it.
- They've already met.
- They don't know yet.
- Have you spoken to him yet?
- Have they got back to you yet?

It can also be used to look back on the more distant past.

- We've been to Singapore a lot over the last few years.
- She's done this type of project many times before.
- We've mentioned it to them on several occasions over the last six months.
- They've often talked about it in the past.

When we look back on the more distant past, we often use the words 'ever' (in questions) and 'never'.

- Have you ever been to Argentina?
- Has he ever talked to you about the problem?
- I've never met Jim and Sally.
- We've never considered investing in Mexico.

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Present perfect continuous

This tense is used to talk about an action or actions that started in the past and continued until recently or that continue into the future:

We can use it to refer to an action that has finished but you can still see evidence.

- Oh, the kitchen is a mess. Who has been cooking?
- You look tired. Have you been sleeping properly?
- I've got a a stiff neck. I've been working too long on computer.

It can refer to an action that has not finished.

- I've been learning Spanish for 20 years and I still don't know very much.
- I've been waiting for him for 30 minutes and he still hasn't arrived.
- He's been telling me about it for days. I wish he would stop.

It can refer to a series of actions.

- She's been writing to her regularly for a couple of years.
- He's been phoning me all week for an answer.
- The university has been sending students here for over twenty years to do work experience.

The present perfect continuous is often used with 'since', 'for', 'all week', 'for days', 'lately', 'recently', 'over the last few months'.

- I've been wanting to do that for ten years.
- You haven't been getting good results over the last few months.
- They haven't been working all week. They're on strike
- He hasn't been talking to me for weeks.
- We've been working hard on it for ages.
- I've been looking at other options recently.
- He's been working here since 2001.

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Present perfect simple or continuous

Often there is very little difference between the present perfect simple and the present perfect continuous. In many cases, both are equally acceptable.

- They've been working here for a long time but Andy has worked here for even longer.
- I've lived here for 10 years and she has been living here for 12 years.

To emphasize the action, we use the continuous form.

- We've been working really hard for a couple of months.
- She's been having a hard time.

To emphasize the result of the action, we use the simple form.

- I've made fifteen phone calls this morning.
- He's written a very good report.

Look at the difference in these examples.

- I've been reading this book for two months but I've only read half of it. It's very difficult to read.
- She's been trying to convince him for 20 minutes but she hasn't managed to yet.
- They've been talking about this for month and they still haven't found a solution.

When an action is finished and you can see the results, use the continuous form.

- The phone bill is enormous. You've been calling your boyfriend in Australia, haven't you?
- You're red in the face. Have you been running?

When you use the words 'ever' or 'never', use the simple form.

- I don't know them. I've never met them.
- Have you ever heard anything so strange in your life.

[exercise 1](#)

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Present Perfect or Past Simple?

(Remember that British and American English have different rules for the use of the present perfect. The comments and the exercises here refer to correct grammar for British English. In American English, it is often considered acceptable to use the past simple in some of these examples.)

The past simple is used to talk about actions in the past that have finished. It talks about 'then' and definitely excludes 'now'.

The present perfect simple to look back on actions in the past from the present. It always includes 'now'.

These sentences are in the past with no connection to the present.

- I first got to know him 10 years ago.
- I started work here in 1989.
- I had too much to eat at lunchtime.

Now look at these same situations seen from the present.

- I've known him for 10 years.
- I've worked here since 1987.
- My stomach hurts. I've eaten too much.

We use time expressions like 'yesterday', 'ago', 'last year', 'in 1999' with the past simple.

- We spoke to him yesterday.
- He came in a few moments ago.
- We made our last purchase from them over a year ago.
- She joined the company in 1999.

We use time expressions like are 'ever', 'never', 'since' with the present perfect.

- I've never seen so many people here before.
- Have you ever been more surprised?
- I've done a lot since we last talked about it.

Typical time expressions used with the present perfect in British English but often used with the past simple in American English are 'already', 'just', 'yet'.

- I haven't done it yet. (UK)
- I didn't do it yet. (US)
- I've just done it. (UK)
- I just did it. (US)
- I've already done it. (UK)
- I already did it. (US)

We can use the time phrase 'for' with both forms, but with different meanings.

- I lived in Paris for a couple of years before I moved here.
- I've lived in Paris for a couple of years and still love it.

[exercise 1](#)

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Past perfect

We use the past perfect simple to talk about what happened before a point in the past. It looks back from a point in the past to further in the past.

- I hadn't known the bad news when I spoke to him.
- I checked with the supplier and they still hadn't received the contract.
- She had already told him before I got a chance to give him my version.
- The company has started the year well but was badly hit by the postal strike.

The past perfect simple is often used when we report what people had said/thought/believed.

- He told me they had already paid the bill.
- He said he believed that John had moved to Italy.
- I thought we had already decided on a name for this product.

[exercise 1](#)

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Past perfect continuous

We use the past perfect continuous to look back at a situation in progress.

- It was a good time to invest. Inflation had been falling for several months.
- Before I changed jobs, I had been working on a plan to reduce production costs.
- We had been thinking about buying a new house but then we decided to stay here.

We use it to say what had been happening before something else happened.

- It had been snowing for a while before we left.
- We had been playing tennis for only a few minutes when it started raining.
- He was out of breath when he arrived because he had been running.

We use it when reporting things said in the past.

- She said she had been trying to call me all day.
- They said they had been shopping.
- I told you I had been looking for some new clothes.

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Past tense review 1

We can use the **past simple** to talk about actions and states which we see as completed in the past.

- I left school when I was sixteen.
- I was very happy then.
- He told me all about his childhood.

We can use the **past continuous** to talk about past events which went on for a period of time.

- While I was driving home, Peter was trying desperately to contact me.
- I was thinking about him last night.
- I was walking in the street when I suddenly fell over.

We can use the **present perfect** when we want to look back from the present to the past.

- I've broken my watch so I don't know what time it is.
- She hasn't arrived yet.
- We've been to Singapore a lot over the last few years.
- Have you ever been to Argentina?

The **Present Perfect Continuous** can be used to talk about an action or actions that started in the past and continued until recently or that continue into the future.

- You look tired. Have you been sleeping properly?
- I've been waiting for him for 30 minutes and he still hasn't arrived.
- He's been phoning me all week for an answer.

We can use the **past perfect simple** to talk about what happened before a point in the past. It looks back from a point in the past to further in the past.

- I hadn't known the bad news when I spoke to him.
- I thought we had already decided on a name for this product.

We can use the **past perfect continuous** to look back at a situation in progress.

- We had been thinking about buying a new house but then we decided to stay here.
- It had been snowing for a while before we left.
- She said she had been trying to call me all day.

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Past tense review 2

We can use the **past simple** to talk about actions and states which we see as completed in the past.

- I left school when I was sixteen.
- I was very happy then.
- He told me all about his childhood.

We can use the **past continuous** to talk about past events which went on for a period of time.

- While I was driving home, Peter was trying desperately to contact me.
- I was thinking about him last night.
- I was walking in the street when I suddenly fell over.

We can use the **present perfect** when we want to look back from the present to the past.

- I've broken my watch so I don't know what time it is.
- She hasn't arrived yet.
- We've been to Singapore a lot over the last few years.
- Have you ever been to Argentina?

The **Present Perfect Continuous** can be used to talk about an action or actions that started in the past and continued until recently or that continue into the future.

- You look tired. Have you been sleeping properly?
- I've been waiting for him for 30 minutes and he still hasn't arrived.
- He's been phoning me all week for an answer.

We can use the **past perfect simple** to talk about what happened before a point in the past. It looks back from a point in the past to further in the past.

- I hadn't known the bad news when I spoke to him.
- I thought we had already decided on a name for this product.

We can use the **past perfect continuous** to look back at a situation in progress.

- We had been thinking about buying a new house but then we decided to stay here.
- It had been snowing for a while before we left.
- She said she had been trying to call me all day.

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Going to

There is no one 'future tense' in English. There are 4 future forms. The one which is used most often in spoken English is 'going to', not 'will'.

We use 'going to' when we want to talk about a plan for the future.

- I'm going to see him later today.
- They're going to launch it next month.
- We're going to have lunch first.
- She's going to see what she can do.
- I'm not going to talk for very long.

Notice that this plan does not have to be for the near future.

- When I retire I'm going to go back to Barbados to live.
- In ten years time, I'm going to be boss of my own successful company.

We use 'going to' when we want to make a prediction based on evidence we can see now.

- Look out! That cup is going to fall off.
- Look at those black clouds. It's going to rain soon.
- These figures are really bad. We're going to make a loss.
- You look very tired. You're going to need to stop soon.

We can replace 'going to go' by 'going'.

- I'm going out later.
- She's going to the exhibition tomorrow.

[exercise 1](#)

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Will - future

Some people have been taught that 'will' is 'the future' in English. This is not correct. Sometimes when we talk about the future we cannot use 'will'. Sometimes when we use 'will' we are not talking about the future.

We can use 'will' to talk about future events we believe to be certain.

- The sun will rise over there tomorrow morning.
- Next year, I'll be 50.
- That plane will be late. It always is.
- There won't be any snow. I'm certain. It's too warm.

Often we add 'perhaps', 'maybe', 'probably', 'possibly' to make the belief less certain.

- I'll probably come back later.
- He'll possibly find out when he sees Jenny.
- Maybe it will be OK.
- Perhaps we'll meet again some day.

We often use 'will' with 'I think' or 'I hope'.

- I think I'll go to bed now.
- I think she'll do well in the job.
- I hope you'll enjoy your stay.
- I hope you won't make too much noise.

We use 'will' at the moment we make a new decision or plan. The thought has just come into our head.

- Bye. I'll phone you when I get there.
- I'll answer that.
- I'll go.
- I won't tell him. I promise.

[exercise 1](#)

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Going to or will

When we want to talk about future facts or things we believe to be true about the future, we use 'will'.

- The President will serve for four years.
- The boss won't be very happy.
- I'm sure you'll like her.
- I'm certain he'll do a good job.

If we are not so certain about the future, we use 'will' with expressions such as 'probably', 'possibly', 'I think', 'I hope'.

- I hope you'll visit me in my home one day.
- She'll probably be a great success.
- I'll possibly come but I may not get back in time.
- I think we'll get on well.

If you are making a future prediction based on evidence in the present situation, use 'going to'.

- Not a cloud in the sky. It's going to be another warm day.
- Look at the queue. We're not going to get in for hours.
- The traffic is terrible. We're going to miss our flight.
- Be careful! You're going to spill your coffee.

At the moment of making a decision, use 'will'. Once you have made the decision, talk about it using 'going to'.

- I'll call Jenny to let her know. Sarah, I need Jenny's number. I'm going to call her about the meeting.
- I'll come and have a drink with you but I must let Harry know. Harry, I'm going to have a drink with Simon.

[exercise 1](#)

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Present forms for the future

We use the present continuous to talk about things that we have already arranged to do in the future.

- I've got my ticket. I'm leaving on Thursday.
- I'm seeing Julie at 5 and then I'm having dinner with Simon.
- He's picking me up at the airport.
- The company is giving everyone a bonus for Christmas.

In many situations when we talk about future plans we can use either the present continuous or the 'going to' future. However, when we use the present continuous, there is more of a suggestion that an arrangement has already been made.

- I'm going to see him./I'm seeing him.
- I'm going to do it./I'm doing it.

We use the present simple to talk about events in the future which are 'timetabled'. We can also use the present continuous to talk about these.

- My plane leaves at 6 in the morning.
- The shop opens at 9.30.
- The sun rises a minute earlier tomorrow.
- My plane is leaving at 8.30.
- The shop is closing at 7.00.
- The sun is rising at 6.32 tomorrow.

[exercise 1](#)

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Will - other uses

Older textbooks often refer to 'will' as 'the future tense' and this has confused a lot of learners.

It is important to remember that when we talk about the future we cannot always use 'will' and that when we use 'will' we are not always talking about the future.

Here 'will' is clearly referring to the future.

- If I speak to her, I'll tell her about it.
- I'll probably visit Sue when I go to Oxford.
- Next birthday she'll be 32. Or so she says.

In these examples, however, 'will' is referring to events happening at the present.

- The car won't start.
- If that's the phone, I'll get it.
- Will you have another cup of coffee?

When we use 'will' referring to the present, the idea being expressed is usually one of 'showing willingness' or 'will power'.

- My baby won't stop crying. I've tried everything and I'm really exhausted.
- I am the boss. You will do as I say.
- I need quiet to write this but he will keep on talking to me. I wish he would leave me alone.

We use 'will' for requests, orders, invitations and offers.

- Will you give me a hand?
- Will you please take a seat?
- Will you have some cake?
- I'll help you.

We use 'will' to make promises or threats.

- I'll do it at once.
- I'll phone him back immediately.
- I won't forget this.
- I'll get my own back some day.

We use 'will' for habit.

- A cat will always find a warm place to sleep.
- My car won't go any faster than this.

We use 'will' for deduction.

- I expect he'll want us to get on with it.
- The phone's ringing. That will be Mark.

Look again at all of these examples of 'will'. They are all to do with the present or are 'timeless'.

[Exercise 1](#)

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Shall

We don't use 'Shall' very frequently in modern English, particularly in American English.

It is used to make offers and suggestions and to ask for advice.

- What time shall we meet?
- Shall we vote on it now?
- What dress shall I wear?
- Shall I open the window?

You only really need to know that about 'shall' in modern English. Read the rest of this only if you want to know more about how some older speakers still use 'shall'.

Formerly, in older grammar, 'shall' was used as an alternative to 'will' with 'I' and 'we'. Today, 'will' is normally used. When we do use 'shall', it has an idea of a more personal, subjective future.

- I shall go to see the boss and I shall ask him to explain this decision.

Notice that the negative of 'shall' can be 'shall not' or 'shan't' – though the second one is now very rare in American English.

- I don't like these people and I shall not go to their party.
- I shan't object if you go without me.

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The imperative

We can use the imperative to give a direct order.

1. Take that chewing gum out of your mouth.
2. Stand up straight.
3. Give me the details.

We can use the imperative to give instructions.

1. Open your book.
2. Take two tablets every evening.
3. Take a left and then a right.

We can use the imperative to make an invitation.

1. Come in and sit down. Make yourself at home.
2. Please start without me. I'll be there shortly.
3. Have a piece of this cake. It's delicious.

We can use the imperative on signs and notices.

1. Push.
2. Do not use.
3. Insert one dollar.

We can use the imperative to give friendly informal advice.

1. Speak to him. Tell him how you feel.
2. Have a quiet word with her about it.
3. Don't go. Stay at home and rest up. Get some sleep and recover.

We can make the imperative 'more polite' by adding 'do'.

- Do be quiet.
- Do come.
- Do sit down.

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The Passive

We use the active form to say what the subject does. For example:

- I speak English every day at work.
- I repaired the flat tire on the car.

We use the passive form to say what happens to people and things, to say what is done to them. For example:

- English is spoken here.
- The car is being repaired.

We use the passive form when we don't know who did the action. For example:

- The car was damaged while it was parked on the street.
- The shirts were made in Turkey.

We use the passive form when what was done is more important than who did it. For example:

- It was approved by Gerry last week.
- I was informed by the Human Resources Manager only two days ago.

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The -ing form

The –ing form can be used like a noun, like an adjective or like a verb.

- Smoking is forbidden.
- I have a long working day.
- I don't like dancing.

When it is used like a noun it may or may not have an article before it.

- Marketing is a very inexact science.
- The marketing of the product will continue for a few months yet.

It can also be part of a 'noun phrase'.

- Speaking to an audience is always stressful.
- Swimming after work is very relaxing.

In formal English, we would use a possessive with the –ing form. In informal English, many people do not.

- I'm angry about his missing the meeting.
- Do you mind my coming?

As an adjective, the –ing form can be used before a noun.

- I was met by a welcoming party at the airport.
- Let's go to the meeting room.

The –ing form is used after prepositions.

- Before leaving, you need to speak to Sarah.
- After discussing it with her, I've changed my mind.
- Instead of feeling sorry for yourself, do some work for charity.

Notice that when 'to' is used as a preposition, it is followed by the –ing form.

- I don't object to working this Sunday.
- I'm looking forward to seeing him again.
- I'm used to working long hours.

There are many verb + -ing combinations. Here are some common ones:

- I admit telling her.
- I appreciate having the raise.
- I avoid speaking to him.
- I consider blowing your nose in public to be wrong.
- I delayed coming until the last possible moment.
- He denied telling her.
- I detest going to parties.

- I enjoy dancing.
- I feel like having a party.
- I've finished writing the report.
- I've given up going to the gym.
- I can't help thinking about it.
- I can't imagine ever leaving this company.
- I don't mind doing that.
- He put off talking to her as long as he could.
- I can't stand drinking beer.

Some verbs can be followed by either the infinitive or –ing form but with different meanings. Here are some common ones:

- I stopped smoking last month. (I no longer smoke.)
- I stopped to smoke a cigarette. (I stopped what I was doing and had a cigarette.)
- I remember telling him. (A memory of the past.)
- I must remember to tell him. (Something to remember for the future.)
- I'm interested in finding out more details. (Interested about the future.)
- I was interested to read his report. (Interested in the past.)

Some verbs can be followed by either the infinitive or –ing form but with the same meaning. Here are some common ones:

- I love to go shopping.
- I love going shopping.
- I'm afraid to fly.
- I'm afraid of flying.
- I started to learn English 5 years ago.
- I started learning English 5 years ago.

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Can

We use 'can' to talk about 'possibility'.

- Can you do that?
- I can't manage to do that.
- You can leave your car in that parking space.
- You cannot smoke in here.

Notice that there are two negative forms: 'can't' and 'cannot'. These mean exactly the same thing. When we are speaking, we usually say 'can't'.

We use 'can' to talk about 'ability'.

- I can speak French.
- I can't drive.

We use 'can' to ask for and give permission. (We also use 'may' for this but is more formal and much less common.)

- Can I speak to you or are you too busy?
- You can use my phone.
- You can't come in.

We use 'can' in offers, requests and instructions.

- Can I help?
- Can you give me a hand?
- When you finish that, you can take out the garbage.

We use 'can' with 'see' 'hear' 'feel' 'smell' 'taste' to talk about something which is happening now . (Where you would use the present continuous with most other verbs.)

- I can smell something burning.
- Can you hear that noise?
- I can't see anything.

We can use 'can't' for deduction. The opposite of 'can't' in this context is 'must'.

- You can't be hungry. You've just eaten.
- You must be hungry. You haven't eaten anything all day.
- He was in London one hour ago when I spoke to him. He can't be here yet.

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Could

'Could' can be used to talk about the past, the present or the future.

'Could' is a past form of 'can'

- When I was living in Boston, I could walk to work.
- He phoned to say he couldn't come.
- I could see him clearly but I couldn't hear him and then the videoconference line went dead.

'Could' is used to make polite requests. We can also use 'can' for these but 'could' is more polite.

- Could you help me, please?
- Could you lend me some money?
- Could I have a lift?
- Could I bother you for a moment?

If we use 'could' in reply to these requests, it suggests that we do not really want to do it. If you agree to the request, it is better to say 'can'.

- Of course I can.
- I could help you if it's really necessary but I'm really busy right now.
- I could lend you some money but I'd need it back tomorrow without fail.
- I could give you a lift as far as Birmingham.

'Could' is used to talk about theoretical possibility and is similar in meaning to 'might'.

- It could rain later. Take an umbrella.
- He could be there by now.
- Could he be any happier?
- It could be Sarah's.

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May / might

may

We can use 'may' to ask for permission. However this is rather formal and not used very often in modern spoken English

- May I borrow your pen?
- May we think about it?
- May I go now?

We use 'may' to suggest something is possible

- It may rain later today.
- I may not have time to do it today.
- Pete may come with us

might

We use 'might' to suggest a small possibility of something. Often we read that 'might' suggests a smaller possibility than 'may', there is in fact little difference and 'might' is more usual than 'may' in spoken English.

- She might be at home by now but it's not sure at all.
- It might rain this afternoon.
- I might not have time to go to the shops for you.
- I might not go.

For the past, we use 'might have'.

- He might have tried to call while I was out.
- I might have dropped it in the street.

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Should

We use 'should' for giving advice.

- You should speak to him about it.
- He should see a doctor.
- We should ask a lawyer.

We use 'should' to give an opinion or a recommendation.

- He should resign now.
- We should invest more in Asia.
- They should do something about this terrible train service.

'Should' expresses a personal opinion and is much weaker and more personal than 'must' or 'have to'. It is often introduced by 'I think'.

- I think they should replace him.
- I don't think they should keep the contract.
- Do you think we should tell her.

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Should 2

We can use 'should' after 'reporting verbs' such as
demand insist propose recommend suggest

- He demanded that we should pay for the repair.
- She insisted that she should pay for the meal.
- I have proposed that he should take charge of the organization.
- The committee recommends that Jane should be appointed.
- We have suggested that Michael should be given a reward for his hard work.

However, it is also possible to say exactly the same thing by omitting the 'should' and just using the infinitive form without 'to'. Some people call this the 'subjunctive' form.

- He demanded that we pay for the repair.
- She insisted that she pay for the meal.
- I have proposed that he take charge of the organization.
- The committee recommends that Jane be appointed.
- We have suggested that Michael be given a reward for his hard work.

We can use 'should' after various adjectives. Typical examples are :
funny interesting natural odd strange surprised surprising typical

- It's funny that you should say that. I was thinking exactly the same thing.
- It's interesting that they should offer him the job. Not an obvious choice.
- It's natural that you should be anxious. Nobody likes speaking in public.
- Isn't it odd that he should be going to the same tiny hotel? What a coincidence.
- It's strange that you should think so. Nobody else does.

We can use 'should' in 'if clauses' when we believe that the possibility of something happening is small.

- If you should happen to see him before I do, can you tell him that I want to speak to him urgently?
- If there should be a problem, just give me a call and I'll sort it out.
- If anyone should ask where I am, say I'm in a meeting.

We use 'should' in various fixed expressions.

To show strong agreement

- They're paying you compensation? I should think so.

To express pleasure when you receive a gift

- What a fantastic present. You really shouldn't have.

To emphasize a visible emotion

- You should have seen the look on her face when she found out that she had got the promotion.

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Must or have to

We can use 'must' to show that we are certain something is true. We are making a logical deduction based upon some clear evidence or reason.

- There's no heating on. You must be freezing.
- You must be worried that she is so late coming home.
- I can't remember what I did with it. I must be getting old.
- It must be nice to live in Florida.

We also use 'must' to express a strong obligation. When we use 'must' this usually means that some personal circumstance makes the obligation necessary (and the speaker almost certainly agrees with the obligation.)

- I must go to bed earlier.
- They must do something about it.
- You must come and see us some time.
- I must say, I don't think you were very nice to him.

We can also use 'have to' to express a strong obligation. When we use 'have to' this usually means that some external circumstance makes the obligation necessary.

- I have to arrive at work at 9 sharp. My boss is very strict.
- We have to give him our answer today or lose out on the contract.
- You have to pass your exams or the university will not accept you.
- I have to send a report to Head Office every week.

In British English, we often use 'have got to' to mean the same as 'have to'.

- I've got to take this book back to the library or I'll get a fine.
- We've got to finish now as somebody else needs this room.

We can also use 'will have to' to talk about strong obligations. Like 'must' this usually means that that some personal circumstance makes the obligation necessary. (Remember that 'will' is often used to show 'willingness'.)

- I'll have to speak to him.
- We'll have to have lunch and catch up on all the gossip.
- They'll have to do something about it.
- I'll have to get back to you on that.

As you can see, the differences between the present forms are sometimes very small and very subtle. However, there is a huge difference in the negative forms.

- We use 'mustn't' to express strong obligations NOT to do something.
- We mustn't talk about it. It's confidential.
- I mustn't eat chocolate. It's bad for me.
- You mustn't phone me at work. We aren't allowed personal calls.
- They mustn't see us talking or they'll suspect something.

We use 'don't have to' (or 'haven't got to' in British English) to state that there is NO obligation or necessity.

- We don't have to get there on time. The boss is away today.
- I don't have to listen to this. I'm leaving.
- You don't have to come if you don't want to.
- He doesn't have to sign anything if he doesn't want to at this stage.
- I haven't got to go. Only if I want to

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Zero conditional

When we talk about things that are generally or always true, we can use:

If/When/Unless plus a present form PLUS present simple or imperative

- If he gets there before me, ask him to wait.
- When you fly budget airline, you have to pay for your drinks and snacks.
- Unless you need more space, a small car is big enough for one person.

Note that we are not talking about a specific event but something which is generally true.

In the condition clause, we can use a variety of present forms. In the result clause, there can only be the present simple or imperative.

- If you visit London, go on the London Eye.
- If unemployment is rising, people tend to stay in their present jobs.
- If you've done that, go and have a coffee.
- When you go on holiday, take plenty of sun cream. It'll be very hot.
- When I'm concentrating, please don't make so much noise.
- When I've finished an article, I always ask Kate to read it through.

Notice that 'unless' means the same as 'if not'.

- Unless he asks you politely, refuse to do any more work on the project.
- Unless prices are rising, it's not a good investment.
- Unless you've been there yourself, you don't really understand how fantastic it is.

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The first conditional

We use the First Conditional to talk about future events that are likely to happen.

- If we take John, he'll be really pleased.
- If you give me some money, I'll pay you back tomorrow.
- If they tell us they want it, we'll have to give it to them.
- If Mary comes, she'll want to drive.

The 'if' clause can be used with different present forms.

- If I go to New York again, I'll buy you a souvenir from the Empire State Building.
- If he's feeling better, he'll come.
- If she hasn't heard the bad news yet, I'll tell her.

The "future clause" can contain 'going to' or the future perfect as well as 'will'.

- If I see him, I'm going to tell him exactly how angry I am.
- If we don't get the contract, we'll have wasted a lot of time and money.

The "future clause" can also contain other modal verbs such as 'can' and 'must'.

- If you go to New York, you must have the cheesecake in Lindy's.
- If he comes, you can get a lift home with him.

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Second conditional

The Second Conditional is used to talk about 'impossible' situations.

- If we were in London today, we would be able to go to the concert in Hyde Park.
- If I had millions dollars, I'd give a lot to charity.
- If there were no hungry people in this world, it would be a much better place.
- If everyone had clean water to drink, there would be a lot less disease.

Note that after I / he/ she /it we often use the subjunctive form 'were' and not 'was'. (Some people think that 'were' is the only 'correct' form but other people think 'was' is equally 'correct' .)

- If she were happy in her job, she wouldn't be looking for another one.
- If I lived in Japan, I'd have sushi every day.
- If they were to enter our market, we'd have big problems.

Note the form 'If I were you' which is often used to give advice.

- If I were you, I'd look for a new place to live.
- If I were you, I'd go back to school and get more qualifications.

The Second Conditional is also used to talk about 'unlikely' situations.

- If I went to China, I'd visit the Great Wall.
- If I was the President, I'd reduce taxes.
- If you were in my position, you'd understand.

Note that the choice between the first and the second conditional is often a question of the speaker's attitude rather than of facts. Compare these examples. Otto thinks these things are possible, Peter doesn't.

- Otto – If I win the lottery, I'll buy a big house.
- Peter – If I won the lottery, I'd buy a big house.
- Otto – If I get promoted, I'll throw a big party.
- Peter – If I got promoted, I'd throw a big party.
- Otto – If my team win the Cup, I'll buy champagne for everybody.
- Peter – If my team won the Cup, I'd buy champagne for everybody.

Note that the 'If clause' can contain the past simple or the past continuous.

- If I was still working in Brighton, I would commute by train.
- If she were coming, she would be here by now.
- If they were thinking of selling, I would want to buy.

Note that the main clause can contain 'would' 'could' or 'might'.

- If I had the chance to do it again, I would do it differently.
- If we met up for lunch, we could go to that new restaurant.
- If I spoke to him directly, I might be able to persuade him.

Also note that sometimes the 'if clause' is implied rather than spoken.

- What would I do without you? ("if you weren't here")
- Where would I get one at this time of night? ("if I wanted one")
- He wouldn't agree. ("if I asked him")

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Third conditional

We can use the Third Conditional to talk about 'impossible' conditions, impossible because they are in the past and we cannot change what has happened.

- If I had worked harder at school, I would have got better grades.
- If I had had time, I would have gone to see him. But I didn't have time.
- If we had bought that house, we would have had to rebuild the kitchen.
- If we had caught the earlier train, we would have got there on time but we were late.

Notice that the main clause can contain 'would', 'could' or 'might'.

- If I had seen him at the meeting, I would have asked him. (But he wasn't there so I didn't.)
- If I had seen him at the meeting, I could have asked him. (But he wasn't there so it wasn't possible.)
- If I had seen him at the meeting, I might have asked him. (But I'm not sure. Perhaps if the opportunity had arisen.)
- If I had paid more attention in class, I would have understood the lesson.

Also notice that sometimes the 'if clause' is implied rather than spoken.

- I'd have done it. ("if you had asked me but you didn't.")
- I wouldn't have said that. ("if I'd been there.")
- He wouldn't have let him get away with that. ("if he had tried that with me.")

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Wish

Let's start off with the easy part. 'I wish to' can mean the same as 'I want to' but it is much, much more formal and much, much less common.

- I wish to make a complaint.
- I wish to see the manager.

You can also use 'wish' with a noun to 'offer good wishes'.

- I wish you all the best in your new job.
- We wish you a merry Christmas.

Notice that when you want to offer good wishes using a verb, you must use 'hope' and not 'wish'.

- We wish you the best of luck.
- We hope you have the best of luck.
- I wish you a safe and pleasant journey.
- I hope you have a safe and pleasant journey.

However, the main use of 'wish' is to say that we would like things to be different from what they are, that we have regrets about the present situation.

- I wish I was rich.
- He wishes he lived in Paris.
- They wish they'd chosen a different leader.

Notice that the verb tense which follows 'I wish' is 'more in the past' than the tense corresponding to its meaning.

- I'm too fat. I wish I was thin.
- I never get invited to parties. I wish I got invited to parties.
- It's raining. I wish it wasn't raining.
- I went to see the latest Star Wars film. I wish I hadn't gone.
- I've eaten too much. I wish I hadn't eaten so much.
- I'm going to visit her later. I wish I wasn't going to visit her later.

In the case of 'will', where 'will' means 'show willingness' we use 'would'.

- He won't help me. I wish he would help me.
- You're making too much noise. I wish you would be quiet.
- You keep interrupting me. I wish you wouldn't do that.

Where 'will' means a future event, we cannot use 'wish' and must use 'hope'.

- There's a strike tomorrow. I hope some buses will still be running.
- I hope everything will be fine in your new job.

In more formal English, we use the subjunctive form 'were' and not 'was' after 'wish'.

- I wish I were taller.
- I wish it were Saturday today.
- I wish he were here.

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Had better

We use “had better” plus the infinitive without “to” to give advice. Although “had” is the past form of “have”, we use “had better” to give advice about the present or future.

- You'd better tell her everything.
- I'd better get back to work.
- We'd better meet early.

The negative form is “had better not”.

- You'd better not say anything.
- I'd better not come.
- We'd better not miss the start of his presentation.

We use “had better” to give advice about specific situations, not general ones. If you want to talk about general situations, you must use “should”.

- You should brush your teeth before you go to bed.
- I shouldn't listen to negative people.
- He should dress more appropriately for the office.

When we give advice about specific situations, it is also possible to use “should”.

- You shouldn't say anything.
- I should get back to work.
- We should meet early.

However, when we use “had better” there is a suggestion that if the advice is not followed, that something bad will happen.

- You'd better do what I say or else you will get into trouble.
- I'd better get back to work or my boss will be angry with me.
- We'd better get to the airport by five or else we may miss the flight.

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Used to

Used to do

We use 'used to' for something that happened regularly in the past but no longer happens.

- I used to smoke a packet a day but I stopped two years ago.
- Ben used to travel a lot in his job but now, since his promotion, he doesn't.
- I used to drive to work but now I take the bus.

We also use it for something that was true but no longer is.

- There used to be a cinema in the town but now there isn't.
- She used to have really long hair but she's had it all cut off.
- I didn't use to like him but now I do.

'Used to do' is different from 'to be used to doing' and 'to get used to doing'
to be used to doing

We use 'to be used to doing' to say that something is normal, not unusual.

- I'm used to living on my own. I've done it for quite a long time.
- Hans has lived in England for over a year so he is used to driving on the left now.
- They've always lived in hot countries so they aren't used to the cold weather here.

to get used to doing

We use 'to get used to doing' to talk about the process of something becoming normal for us.

- I didn't understand the accent when I first moved here but I quickly got used to it.
- She has started working nights and is still getting used to sleeping during the day.
- I have always lived in the country but now I'm beginning to get used to living in the city.

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Asking questions 1

The basic rule for asking questions in English is straightforward: Invert the order of the subject and the first auxiliary verb.

- It is snowing. = Is it snowing?
- He can speak German. = Can he speak German?
- They have lived here a long time. = Have they lived here a long time?
- She will arrive at ten o'clock. = Will she arrive at ten o'clock?
- He was driving fast. = Was he driving fast?
- You have been smoking. = Have you been smoking?

If there is no auxiliary, use part of the verb 'to do'.

- You speak fluent French. = Do you speak fluent French?
- She lives in Brussels. = Does she live in Brussels?
- They lived in Manchester. = Did they live in Manchester?
- He had an accident. = Did he have an accident?

Most questions with question words are made in the same way:

- How often does she use it?
- Why don't you come?
- Where do you work?
- How many did you buy?
- What time did you go?
- Which one do you like?
- Whose car were you driving?

Note *who*, *what* and *which* can be the subject. Compare:

- Who is coming to lunch? (*who* is the subject of the verb)
- Who do you want to invite to lunch? (*you* is the subject of the verb)
- What happened? (*what* is the subject of the verb)
- What did you do? (*you* is the subject of the verb)

Note the position of the prepositions in these questions:

- Who did you speak **to**?
- What are you looking **at**?
- Where does he come **from**?

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Asking questions 2

In the section Questions 1, we looked at how to ask direct questions. To make a question, we invert the order of the subject and the first auxiliary verb.

- Where is Johnny?
- Has he found it yet?

If there is no auxiliary, use part of the verb 'to do'. For example:

- What time did he arrive?
- How often do you play tennis?

However, when we ask for information, we often say 'Do you know...?' or 'Could you tell me....?' These are indirect questions and more polite.

Note that the word order is different. For example:

- Do you know where Johnny is?
- Have you any idea if he has found it?

Note that we don't use do, does or did. For example:

- Could you tell me what time he arrived?
- Would you mind telling me how often you play tennis?

Use if or whether when there is no question word.

- Has he done it? = Do you know if he has done it?
- Is it ready? = Can you tell me if it is ready?

The same changes in word order happen when we report questions. Note that in reported questions, the verb changes to the past:

- What are you doing? = He asked me what I was doing.
- What have you done about it? = He asked me what I had done about it.
- Do you work with Pamela? = He asked me if I worked with Pamela.

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Question tags

We use tags in spoken English but not in formal written English.

They are not really questions but are a way of asking the other person to make a comment and so keep the conversation open.

Making a tag is very mechanical. To make a tag, use the first auxiliary. If there is no auxiliary, use do, does or did. With a positive sentence, make a negative tag and with a negative sentence, make a positive tag.

- It's beautiful, isn't it?
- He has been, hasn't he?
- You can, can't you?
- It must be, mustn't it?
- You know him, don't you?
- He finished it, didn't he?
- He will come, won't he?

- It isn't very good, is it?
- It hasn't rained, has it?
- It can't be, can it?
- Jenny doesn't know James, does she?
- They didn't leave, did they?
- He won't do it, will he?

Notice these:

- There isn't an ATM here, is there?
- Let's have a cup of coffee, shall we?

To reply, use the same auxiliary:

- It's beautiful, isn't it? ~ Yes, it is. I think it's fabulous.
- It isn't very good, is it? ~ No, it isn't. In fact, it's terrible.

Although, the rules are very simple and mechanical, in order to use them easily in conversation, they have to be automatic. So you need to hear and practice them very often.

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Reported speech

We use reported speech when we are saying what other people say, think or believe.

- He says he wants it.
- We think you are right.
- I believe he loves her.
- Yesterday you said you didn't like it but now you do!
- She told me he had asked her to marry him.
- I told you she was ill.
- We thought he was in Australia.

When we are reporting things in the present, future or present perfect we don't change the tense.

- He thinks he loves her.
- I'll tell her you are coming.
- He has said he'll do it.

When we tell people what someone has said in the past, we generally make the tense 'more in the past'.

- You look very nice. = I told him he looked very nice.
- He's working in Siberia now. = She told me he was working in Siberia now.
- Polly has bought a new car. = She said Polly had bought a new car.
- Jo can't come for the weekend. = She said Jo couldn't come for the weekend.
- Paul called and left a message. = He told me Paul had called and had left me a message.
- I'll give you a hand. = He said he would give me a hand.

However, when we are reporting something that was said in the past but is still true, it is not obligatory to make the tense 'more in the past'. The choice is up to the speaker. For example:

"The train doesn't stop here."

- He said the train doesn't stop here.
- He said the train didn't stop here.

"I like Sarah."

- She said she likes Sarah.
- She said she liked Sarah.

When we are reporting what was said, we sometimes have to change other words in the sentence.

We have to change the pronoun if we are reporting what someone else said. Compare these two sentences. In each case the person actually said "I don't want to go."

- I said I didn't want to go.
- Bill said he didn't want to go.

We have to change words referring to 'here and now' if we are reporting what was said in a different place or time.

Compare these two sentences. In each case the person actually said "I'll be there at ten tomorrow."

- (If it is later the same day) He said he would be there at ten tomorrow.
- (If it is the next day) He said he would be there at ten today.

Now compare these two sentences.

- (If we are in a different place) He said he would be there tomorrow at ten.
- (If we are in the place he is coming to) He said he would be here at ten tomorrow.

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Reported speech 2

We also use reported speech when we are saying what other people asked or wanted to know. We do not use do or question marks in indirect questions.

- "What time is it?" = He asked me what time it was.
- "Why hasn't he come?" = She wondered why he hadn't come.
- "When will you be arriving?" = He wanted to know when we would be arriving.
- "What were you doing?" = They questioned him about what he had been doing.

We use the same structure when we report answers.

- "147 Oak Street." = I told him what my address was.
- "I didn't have time to do it." = She explained why she hadn't done it.
- "Look at this dress and bag." = She showed me what she had bought.
- "Put the paper here and press this button." = He demonstrated how the scanner worked.

Yes/no questions are reported with if or whether.

- Do you want a ride? = Mike asked me if I wanted a ride.
- Are you coming? = They wanted to know if I was coming.
- Will you be here later? = She asked me whether I would be here later.

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Suppose

We often use 'suppose' to mean 'imagine' or 'guess'

- I suppose you'll be meeting Danielle when you go to Paris?
- When you weren't there, I supposed you must have been held up.
- I suppose you two know each other?

Notice that 'suppose' is not normally used in the continuous form. We do not usually say 'I am supposing'.

- Now I suppose we'll have to do something else.
- We're waiting for John and I suppose he must be stuck in traffic.
- At this moment I suppose it doesn't matter.

Notice that for 'imagine not' or 'guess not' that we make 'suppose' negative, not the other verb.

- I don't suppose you know where Mary is?
- I don't suppose he'll do anything.
- I don't suppose you have a Nokia phone charger here?

When responding to an idea with 'suppose', you can use 'so' to avoid repeating the idea that has already been expressed.

- Is Susan coming to this meeting? ~ I suppose so.

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Suppose 2

'Supposed to be' can be used to mean 'it is said/believed'.

- The new James Bond movie is supposed to be excellent.
- He is supposed to have been rude to Mark but I don't believe it.
- It is supposed to be the best restaurant in town.

'Supposed to be' can also be used to talk about what is arranged, intended or expected. It is a bit like 'should'.

- I'm supposed to get to work by 8.
- John is supposed to turn off all the lights when he leaves.
- I'm supposed to pay my rent on the first of the month.
- It's not supposed to be here.

Often there is a suggestion that the action 'supposed to' happen does not actually happen.

- I'm supposed to be there before 8 but I'm often late.
- You were supposed to phone me.
- I'm supposed to be getting on a plane to Tokyo at this very minute.

'Not supposed to' often suggests that something is not allowed or prohibited.

- You're not supposed to smoke in here.
- I'm not supposed to tell you.
- We're not supposed to use the Internet for personal reasons at work.

'Suppose' can also be used as a conjunction to mean 'what if'. Notice that the verb which follows it is sometimes, but not always, put 'more in the past'.

- Suppose we take the earlier train to Munich? It would give us more time there.
- Suppose we took the plane instead? That would give us even more time.
- There's nobody in reception to let our visitors in. Suppose I sit there until somebody comes?
- I'm going to ask him for a pay increase. ~ Suppose he said 'no'? What would you do?

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Have something done

If you 'have something done', you get somebody else to do something for you.

- I'm going to have my hair cut.
- She's having her house redecorated.
- I'm having a copy of the report sent to you

In informal English, we can replace 'have' by 'get'.

- We're getting a new telephone system installed.
- They will be getting the system repaired as quickly as they can.
- I got the bill sent direct to the company.

We can also use 'have/got something done' in situations where something bad has happened to people or their possessions. This is not something they wanted to happen.

- John had all his money stolen from his hotel bedroom.
- We had our car damaged by a falling tree.
- I got my nose broken playing rugby.

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Should have

We can use 'should have' to talk about past events that did not happen.

- I should have let her know what was happening but I forgot.
- He should have sent everybody a reminder by email.
- They should have remembered that their guests don't eat pork.

We can also use 'should have' to speculate about events that may or may not have happened.

- She should have got the letter this morning. I expect she'll give us a call about it later.
- He should have arrived at his office by now. Let's try ringing him.
- They should have all read that first email by this stage. It's time to send the next one.

We can use 'should not have' to speculate negatively about what may or may not have happened.

- She shouldn't have left work yet. I'll call her office.
- He shouldn't have boarded his plane yet. We can probably still get hold of him.
- They shouldn't have sent the report off for printing yet. There is still time to make changes.

We can also use 'should not have' to regret past actions.

- I shouldn't have shouted at you. I apologise.
- We shouldn't have left the office so late. We should have anticipated this bad traffic.
- They shouldn't have sacked him. He was the most creative person on their team.

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Can have / Could have

We can use 'could have' to talk about something somebody was capable of doing but didn't do.

- I could have gone to Oxford University but I preferred Harvard.
- She could have married him but she didn't want to.
- They could have bought a house here 20 years ago but chose not to.

Often, there is a sense of criticism.

- You could have phoned me to let me know.
- They could have helped me instead of just sitting there.
- I could have done more to help you. Sorry.

We can use 'couldn't have' to talk about something we were not capable of doing.

- I couldn't have managed without you.
- I couldn't have got the job. He was always going to appoint his nephew.
- I couldn't have enjoyed myself more. Thank you for a lovely day.

We can use 'could have' to speculate about what has happened. (We can also use 'may have' or 'might have' in these situations.)

- She could have taken the earlier train.
- Simon could have told her.
- They could have overheard what we said.

We can also use 'can have' to speculate about what has happened but only in questions and negative sentences and with words such as 'hardly', 'never' and 'only'.

- Can she have forgotten about our meeting?
- He can't have seen us.
- They can hardly have thought that I was not interested in the job.

We can also use 'could have' to speculate about something that didn't happen.

- You could have broken your neck, jumping out the window like that.
- He could have hurt somebody, throwing a bottle out of the window like that.
- I could have done well in my exam if I'd worked harder.

You can also use 'could have' to talk about possible present situations that have not happened.

- I could have been earning a lot as an accountant but the work was just too boring.
- He could have been Prime Minister now but he got involved in a big financial scandal.
- They could have been the market leaders now if they had taken his advice.

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Will be doing

We can use 'will be doing' to talk about something that will be in progress at a particular moment in the future.

- This time next week, I'll be sitting on the beach in Barbados.
- I'll be thinking about you all back in the office – and I'll be laughing.
- We'll be enjoying ourselves too, boss. We won't be doing any work while you are not here.

We can use 'will be doing' to talk about future events that are fixed or decided.

- I'll be visiting your country on a regular basis. In fact, I'm going to be coming next month.
- He'll be looking after the factory until we can appoint a new manager.
- They'll be thinking about this very carefully over the next few months.

We can use 'will be doing' to predict what is happening now.

- Try phoning his hotel. He'll probably still be having breakfast.
- They'll be deciding who gets the contract at this very moment. I'm very nervous.
- She's not in her office. She'll be having lunch in the canteen.

We can use 'will be doing' to ask extremely politely, and with no pressure, about future plans.

- Will you be eating with us this evening?
- Will you be needing anything else?
- Will they be joining us for dinner?

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Will have done

We can use 'will have done' to talk about what will have been achieved by a certain moment in time.

- We'll have been in these offices for eight years next month.
- She'll have visited ten countries in twelve days by the time she gets back.
- I'll have finished this project by Friday.

If we want to emphasise the continuity of the activity, we can use the continuous form.

- I'll have been working here for 35 years by the time I retire.
- She'll have been driving for more than fifteen hours straight by the time she gets here.
- They'll have been working with us for 15 years by the end of this year.

We can also use 'will have done' to predict what we think has already happened at present.

- He'll have already read the report by now. Too late to change it.
- She'll have boarded her plane. It's too late to contact her.
- They'll have decided by now. We should hear the result today or tomorrow.

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