

HUNTER COLLEGE READING/WRITING CENTER
GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS: The Verb System
 The Two-Tense Verb System

Most people think of English as having three main verb tenses: Past, Present, and Future, and grammar books identify a total of twelve tenses, including a Perfect, Progressive, and Perfect-Progressive tense to go along with each of the three main tenses.

But most linguists agree that English actually has a two-tense system – Present and Past. Looking at the verb system of English this way is both simpler and more suitable to the actual structure of the language. English sentences are framed around a time frame of either THEN (the Past) for actions that are completed or NOW (the Present) for actions that are not completed. All the other verbs, including perfect, progressive, and future forms are expressed in relationship to one of these two time frames; they refer to BEFORE, DURING, and AFTER the main time frame, and they all contain either a past tense or a present tense form.

	PRESENT	PAST
Simple tenses	I eat	I ate
Perfect forms	She has eaten before today	She had eaten before yesterday
Progressive forms	They are eating now	They were eating then
Future forms	He says he will eat later	He said he would eat later.

The chart below presents the two-tense verb system of English, illustrating the division between past and present and the relationships to the main time frame of each verb form. Note the form of the main verb for each time frame in italics

PAST TIME FRAME			PRESENT TIME FRAME		
BEFORE (Perfect)	MAIN TIME	AFTER (Future)	BEFORE (Perfect)	MAIN TIME	AFTER (Future)
-> -> -> had + <i>-ed/-en</i> had eaten	<i>-ed (or irregular)</i> ate (irreg) Or did + base did eat	-> -> -> would + base would eat	-> -> -> have/has + <i>-ed/-en</i> have eaten has eaten	-> <i>base</i> eat <i>base + -s</i> eats Or do/does + <i>base</i> do eat does eat	-> -> -> will + base will eat
DURING (Progressive)			DURING (Progressive)		
-> -> -> -> -> -> -> was/were + <i>-ing</i> was eating were eating			-> -> -> -> -> -> -> am/is/are + <i>-ing</i> am eating is eating are eating		