

Contrasting tenses

As illustrated in the table in step 1, a verb can be in the present or the past. Then the aspect (simple, be+ing, perfect or perfect be+ing) gives us additional information about a verb by telling us whether the action was completed, continuous, neither, or both.

- **Signal words**

The first thing that will help you choose which tense you should choose is signal words. Some signal words will demand a certain tense. Here is a basic table.

	PAST	PRESENT
Simple	Any signal word that indicates the date when something happened and it is completed/over: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • last Monday / week / month / year... • ... ago • in (+year / + month ...) • Yesterday • for ... 	Any signal word that indicates a frequency or a recurrent event: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • every day • sometimes • always • often • usually • seldom • never • first ... then
Be + ing	Any signal word that shows an ongoing action (in the past): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While • As 	Any signal word that shows an ongoing action (action happening at the moment of speaking) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • now • at the moment • Look! • Listen!
Perfect		Any signal word that indicates a link between the past and the present: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • just • yet • never • ever • already • so far • up to now • since • for • recently
Perfect be + ing		Any signal word that focuses on the duration of an action: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all day • the whole day • how long • since • for

Step 4 - Contrasting Tenses

Choosing the wrong tense might lead to some misunderstandings. Look at the following video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kT_NeGRWy4

He says ...	He should have said ...
I go to school in Berlin <i>Meaning: He is still a student.</i>	I went to school (past simple) <i>Meaning: He completed his studies and he no longer studies.</i>
I live in Milano, I live in Sri Lanka <i>Meaning: He lives in 2 different places at the same time!</i>	I lived in Milano, I lived in Sri Lanka (past simple) <i>Meaning: He spent time in these two places and it is over now.</i>
But I <u>always</u> live here <i>Meaning: He lives in France.</i>	I am still living here.
I have burger <i>Meaning: He does not need to order as he has a burger.</i>	I will have a burger (future) <i>Meaning:</i>
I have four girlfriends <i>Meaning: He dates 4 women. He is polygamous!</i>	I have had four girlfriends (present perfect) <i>Meaning: He dated 4 women in the past -> valeur de bilan</i>
I love all my girlfriends <i>Meaning: He dates and loves 4 women!</i>	I have loved all my girlfriends (present perfect) <i>Meaning: He loved each of them at the time he dated them -> valeur de bilan</i>
I <u>never</u> date Indian women* <i>Meaning: This is racist : he does not date women who are Indian!</i>	I have never dated Indian women (present perfect) <i>Meaning: He has never had an indian girlfriend but why not date one -> valeur de bilan</i>
⇒ The boy uses present simple in all his sentences. Present simple is used for established facts and things in general and also for habitual activities or routines .	

* Keep in mind that in more complex structures it is important to have a look at the action in a sentence rather than spotting a signal word.

- Never/always...
- + simple present -> a habit or a routine (=> a present tense in French)
- + present perfect -> assessment (=> a past tense in French)
 - For + duration (e.g. for 4 years)
- + past simple -> pendant (4 ans)
- + present perfect -> depuis (4 ans)
 - Etc

- **If there is no signal word, then what?**

Remember that the choice of the aspect (simple, be+ing, perfect or perfect be+ing) depends on what the speaker wants to focus on, what s/he wants to emphasize.

Look at the following sentences from Hillary's, Ndira's and Raghav's testimonies.

- **Past simple or present perfect?**

Hillary

I've **done** it twice now. (...) For me the challenge hasn't so much been the rigors of a foreign education system—I **adapted** relatively quickly both times—but rather the sense of a personality temporarily lost. (...)

My first study-abroad experience in Beijing **fostered** my love of travel—which has lead me on adventures below the equator and above the arctic circle. It **gave** me my (French) husband whom I **met** on a train in China headed for the Himalayas. My second study abroad experience **gave** me the gift of a second language and a love of those glorious, stinky cheeses that just don't exist across the pond. With time, I've even **been able to** recapture my personality—bit by bit.

⇒ In this extract, Hillary gives information about the past mentioning elements that are finished (**adapt, foster, give, meet**)

She also presents actions that happened in the past and that have consequences on the present (**do, be able to**). The signal words (twice now & with time) indicate the link she chooses to establish between the past and the present.

Ndrina

I **finished** my Bachelor's degree in chemical engineering at the University of Pristina, and just after that I **won** a fully-funded scholarship from the European Union to study a Master's degree abroad. I **completed** my first semester in Paris, Université Paris Sud, and now I **am pursuing** my studies in Porto, Portugal, where I **am currently living**.

All my academic life, I **have been inspired** by some of my professors; they **convinced** me to study chemistry, to love chemistry. I **have been** very lucky to have had this opportunity to study in such renowned Universities, coming from such a small country which most of people I **met** abroad **didn't** even **know existed**.

⇒ In this extract, Ndrina mentions actions that are completed for her (no link) and which have no consequences on the present (**finish, win, complete, convince, meet, not know, exist**).

She talks about what is happening at the moment when she writes (**pursue, live**) as indicated by the signal words (now & currently).

To finish, she establishes a link between the past and the present (**inspire, be**). The time marker "all my academic life" associated with the present perfect means her academic life is not over. The absence of time marker in the following sentence indicates she **chooses** to stress this past event has consequences on the present (= she was very very lucky and she still feels very lucky).

Raghav

In the 22 years of my life this venture of studying abroad **has been** the most exciting learning experience.

It **has been** daunting and satisfying at the same time.

I **was** blessed and fortunate enough to have my best friend along with me for this new phase of both of our lives. I **didn't know** what to expect from this new life of living far from home, but I **knew** that at least I would get something positive from it.

Step 4 - Contrasting Tenses

The courses here, although fast-paced and intensive, **have been** instrumental in pushing me forward towards my future goals.

I've been happy to apply a lot of what I've learnt in the daily life.

This experience **has taught** me how to be independent and strong in many ways

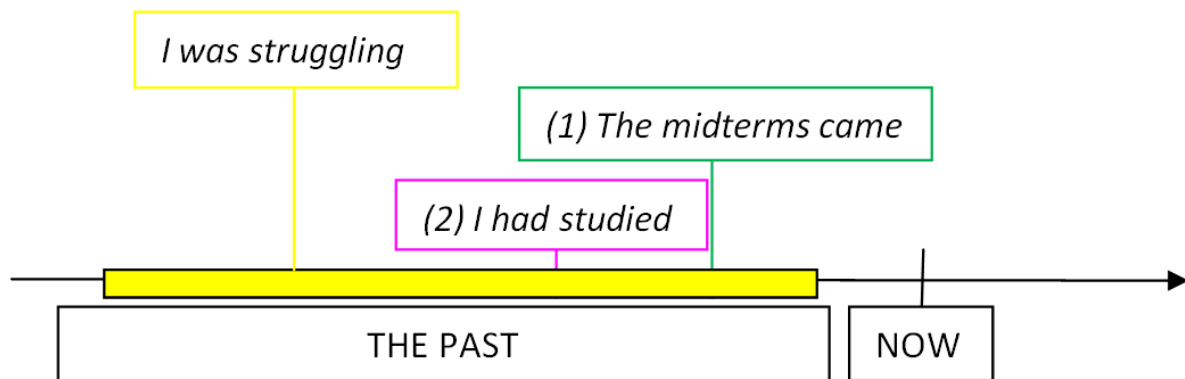
⇒ In these extracts, and in most of his testimony, Raghav stresses what he has learnt from his experience that is why he chooses present perfect over past simple (**be** (X4), **learn**, **teach**). He focuses on the benefits of this year in Paris Sud and how this past experience has made him who he is today (link past/present).

The passage in the past simple is related to his feelings before the experience started. It is then finished.

- **Past tenses: past be+ing, past simple, past perfect**

Ndrina

Yes, that's how much I **was struggling**. When the time **came** for the midterms, I **had** already **studied** everything, I **was** sleepless for months, but yet the results **were** not the best.



⇒ I **was struggling** - past be + ing - the action (**struggle**) was in progress in the past. It is often translated with the French tense "imparfait"

In the sentence "(1) When the time **came** for the midterms, (2) I **had** already **studied** everything" the two actions are not presented chronologically. The first action (**came**) happened after the second mentioned (**study**) but the speaker chooses to present them like that.