

Perfect forms - Simple or Continuous?



There are two types of perfect tenses; simple perfect tenses (present perfect, past perfect and future perfect) and progressive perfect tenses (present perfect continuous, past perfect continuous and future perfect continuous). The perfect forms are generally used to represent something that has happened up to another point in time. For example:

Present Tenses

Peter has visited Paris twice. (In his life, up until now)

Jane has been playing tennis for two hours (until now)

Past Tenses

They had lived in New York for 3 years before they moved to Seattle. (up to the time they moved to Seattle)

She had been studying for 4 hours when he arrived. (The four hours directly before he arrived)

Future Tenses

We will have finished the course by this time next year. (up to this time a year from now)

I will have been working for 2 hours by the time he arrives tomorrow. (the two hours before he arrives tomorrow)

Present Perfect Simple or Continuous?

So, what are the differences between the simple and progressive forms of the perfect? Well, first of all, remember to keep in mind the progressive is only used with **ACTION verbs**. Another important difference is that we use the simple perfect forms to express finished **QUANTITIES** and the progressive perfect forms when we are stressing the continuous duration of a specific action mentioned.

Present Perfect Continuous

Recent activity: to emphasise the recency of a past activity. we often use lately or recently - *Example: She's been working hard recently*

Emphasis on the duration or length of an activity - *Example: Jack has been painting for 4 hours.*

Recently finished activity with a present result - *Example: I've been working in the garden, that's why my hands are so dirty.*

No difference in meaning. Often the present perfect progressive and the present perfect can have the same meaning. This is often the case with verbs of living, occupation or vocation) - *Example: I've been living in Leghorn for 3 years. OR I've lived in Leghorn for 3 years.*

Present Perfect

Indefinite time in the past (experience). Emphasis is on the completed action at an indefinite time in the past. - *Example: Susan's written 3 books.*

Emphasis on QUANTITY - *Example: I've read 300 pages of Tom Smith's latest book.*

Duration from past to present (see #4 of present perfect progressive) - *Example: Peter has worked for that company for 5 years.*

Here is an excellent example of the difference between the two forms when referring to duration of an activity as compared to quantity:

He's been driving for 6 hours. He's driven 320 miles.

Past Perfect

Past Perfect Continuous

Past perfect progressive is used to express **CONTINUOUS** activity up to a specific time in the past.

Example: They had been waiting for 2 hours before their friends finally arrived.

Past Perfect

Past perfect is used to express **FINISHED** activity before a specific point of time in the past.

Example: He had already eaten when his wife came home.

Future Perfect

Future Perfect Continuous

Future perfect progressive is used to emphasise the length of time or duration of an event occurring before and up to another event in the future.

- *Example: By the time they arrive, we will have been waiting for 4 hours!*

To emphasise the duration of an activity. - *Example: John will have been studying for 6 years by the time he finishes his exam.*

Future Perfect

Future perfect is used to refer to an event completed before another future event or time. - *Example: By the time Mary finishes this course, she will have taken 26 exams.*

To emphasise not how long something has taken, but that the action is completed. - *Example: By the time he retires, he will have worked for 36 years.*

QUIZ

Here is a little quiz to check your knowledge:

They a) have been working b) have worked in the garage, that's why their clothes are greasy.

She a) had met b) had been meeting John before he came to work here.

By the time the letter arrives, a) I will have left b) I will have been leaving.

When Karen telephoned, they a) had been studying b) had studied for two hours.

I'm tired. I a) have just finished b) have just been finishing my homework.

Peter a) has been reading b) has read 3 books by Hemingway.

By the time we finish, we a) will have painted b) will have been painting for 4 hours.

I made sure that I a) had learned b) had been learning Italian well before I left for Rome.

She a) has known b) has been knowing John for 10 years.

They a) have thought of you b) have been thinking of you a lot recently.

KEY

Answer Key

a
a
a
a
a
b
b
a
a
b

LA WEB DE RAFA