

THE WRITER: A TENSE STORY

What are you doing?
I'm **writing** a letter.
Do you often **write** letters?
Yes, I've **written** them ever since I was young.
How often **do** you **write**?
I usually **write** one each day.
You **wrote** one yesterday?
Yes, and I've **written** one today, and I'll **write** one again tomorrow.
When **will** you **write** tomorrow?
I'll **be writing** all day.
But when will you be finished?
By midnight I'll **have written** my letter.
I see, you **will have written** the letter by midnight?
Yes, the letter **will have been written** by 12:00.
And at 11:50?
At 11:50 the letter **will be being written**.
But at 11:45?
The letter still **will have been being written**.
I see. And today's letter **is** now **being written**?
No. I've just finished. It's **been written** already.
What about yesterday's letter?
It's **been written**.
And the letter from the day before that?
It **had been written** by yesterday morning.
I see. Then when exactly **was** it **written**?
I **had written** the first letter by the time I began yesterday's.
I heard that Osborne visited you while you were busy yesterday.
Yes. I **was writing** when he knocked on my door.
The letter **was being written** when he arrived? What did Osborne do then?
He asked me when I would be finished, and I told him that I **would write** until noon.
Aha! The letter **would have been written** by noon?
Yes, and it **would have been being written** just until noon.
I see. You **would be writing** until then.
But the letter **would not have been written**.
So, I'm finished here. Still **writing**?
No. I'm through. The letter **is written**, I've **written** enough.
No more writing?
Unfortunately, I **write** again tomorrow.

Times and the Appropriate Tenses

The following is an excerpt from the author's book School Writing: A Brief Guide to Style and Usage (privately published, 1983). Readers may wish to use this page in conjunction with "The Writer: A Tense Story" or for general reference – ED.

BEFORE-PAST	PAST	AFTER-PAST	NOW	BEFORE-FUTURE	FUTURE
←-----					
Past Perfect: I had written Narrative Past: I was writing (also Past Prog.)	Past tense: I wrote Present Perfect: I have written	Pseudo-conditional: I would write	Present: I write Present Progressive: I am writing	Future Perfect: I shall/will have written	Future: I shall/will write Present: I write tomorrow Present Progressive + Infinitive: I am going to write

The above-given table indicates times and the verb forms that are appropriate to each. The verb forms may be used in the following manners:

1. PRESENT

- a. When referring to **right now**, use the PRESENT tense.
*I **sing** a song of myself ...*
*I **celebrate** myself ...*
- b. When referring to **habitual actions**, use PRESENT tense.
*We **go** to school every day ...*
*The police **patrol** our streets regularly ...*
- c. When referring to **continuing action**, i.e., **happening now**, we PRESENT PROGRESSIVE tense.
*I **am singing** ...*
*The investigators **are** currently **investigating** the evidence ...*
Caution: Do not overuse the progressive.

2. FUTURE

- a. The FUTURE form (shall/will + verb)
*I **shall** see my Maker face to face.*
*They **will** not live in vain ...*
- b. The SIMPLE PRESENT
*Tomorrow I **fly** to Munich.*
*He **leaves** next week on vacation.*
Note: This construction always requires an adverb of future time.
- c. When using "if" or "when" clauses that refer to the future, use the SIMPLE PRESENT:
*If I see him later, I'll **give** him your note.*
*Venture not upon the moor at night when the forces of evil **are** at their highest ...*

3. BEFORE-FUTURE

When referring to an action that **will be completed** by a certain stated future time, use the FUTURE PERFECT (present form of will or shall + have + past participle).
*When the doctor arrives, the intern **will have finished** the operation.*
*Tomorrow at seven you will see that we **shall have collected** the necessary money.*

4. PAST

a. When a **definite time** is stated, use the SIMPLE PAST.

*Yesterday, all my troubles **seemed** so far away.*

*I **wrote** you over a month ago ...*

*At eleven o'clock all work **stopped**.*

b. When the time is **indefinite** (i.e., action completed by the present), use PRESENT PERFECT (have + past participle).

*I **have written** to him once before.*

*Often **have** we **seen** the mark.*

*They've always **answered** us in the past.*

5. BEFORE-PAST

a. When referring to an event that was **completed before** another past event, use PAST PERFECT (had + past participle).

*When we arrived (past), John **had** already **prepared** (before-past) the dinner.*

*Iago **had set** (before-past) the trap when Othello first saw (past) Cassio.*

b. When referring to, i.e., **when describing**, an activity that began before an event in the past and that **continues throughout** the past the past event, use the NARRATIVE PAST, the PAST PROGRESSIVE (past form of be + present participle).

*They **were writing** while we argued.*

*Holmes **was packing** his pipe full of shag while Miss Roylott explained her dilemma.*

6. AFTER-PAST

When referring to an activity that occurs **after an event in the past** (but still in the writer's past), describe the past event in SIMPLE PAST and the after-past event with would + verb.

*When I spoke (past) with Hecuba, she said that she **would do** (after-past) her best.*

*Yesterday the Grinch exclaimed (past) that he **would steal** (after-past) the holiday.*

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