Unit 3: English Tense Functions

Time References

When we use the present simple tense, many people assume that we are referring to the present, that is, right now. Is this always true? For example:

- The Prime Minister unveils new policies.

This is taken from a newspaper headline. Although it is written in the present tense, it refers to a past time. It is a reported past event. As you can see, the tense name and the time reference do not always coincide. This happens because tenses have to do with the form of a verb phrase rather than its meaning.

Present and Past Simple Tense Functions

In addition to referring to different times, sentences that use the same tense can have quite different functions.

Look at the following four sentences. All of them use the present simple tense construction yet they all have different functions.

These sentences express a scientific or general truth:

- Tadpoles turn into frogs.
- It snows in winter.
- It’s cold in outer space.

The sentences express a routine.

- I play squash at least once a week.
- I write two pages on my novel every day.
- Martin drives for a living.

These sentences are newspaper headlines and describe recent past events.

- Two Hundred Die in Plane Crash.
- Man Gives Birth
- Bush Invades Iraq
These sentences contain information that is found on schedules or timetables and refer to a future time.

- The exam **starts** at 8:30 tomorrow.
- The plane **sets off** in 30 minutes.
- The train **leaves** at ten o’clock tonight.

Now look at the following four examples that all use the **First Conditional**. Notice how each sentence uses the same structure yet the function or meaning is different. The present tense verb in each of the first clauses is highlighted.

These are **practical suggestions**.

- If you **practice** every day, you’ll play the piano well.
- If you **treat** people well, they will love you.
- If you **eat** well, you’ll be healthy.

These are **warnings**.

- If you **use** that CD as a coaster, you’ll damage it.
- If you don’t **stop**, you’ll hurt yourself.
- If you **go** too fast, you’ll get caught.

These are **threats**.

- If you **go** near my girlfriend again, I’ll smack you.
- If you **damage** my car, you’ll have to pay for it.
- If you **come** near me again, I’ll call the police.

The difference between warnings and threats may not be immediately apparent. However, in warnings the speaker tells the listener what will happen if the listener takes a certain course of action, whereas in threats the speaker tells the listener what the speaker will do to the listener if the listener takes a certain course of action.

Similar to the present simple, the **past simple** tense can also have a variety of functions.

It can be part of **reported speech**. Reported (or indirect) Speech retells what someone has said opposed to quoting the person. For example:
Direct Speech: Larry said: "I want to go to Spain."
Indirect (reported) Speech: Larry said that he **wanted** to go to Spain.

It can refer to a **past state**.
- She **liked** rock music
- He **owned** a mansion

It can refer to a **hypothetical situation** (being part of the second conditional).
- If you **knew** her better, you wouldn't be surprised.
- It would be easy if you **tried**.

It can convey a **present regret** or **wish**.
- If only I **wasn't** so shy!
- I wish you **spoke** with him.

It can refer to a **past habit** or **routine**.
- She **listened** to her favorite CDs every morning.
- Whenever I **phoned** Lucy she said she was so busy.

It often describes a **completed action at a specified time in the past**.
- The fireworks **began** at 8 o'clock.
- I **invited** him to the party yesterday.

**Continuous Functions**

The present continuous (sometimes referred to as the present progressive) uses the –ing form of the verb and is often used to describe something that is temporary. For example:

It's raining

That is, it’s raining now, but it is temporary.
The past continuous (sometimes referred to as the past progressive), which also uses the –ing form of the verb is used to describe something that was temporary sometime in the past. For example:

It was raining yesterday

That is, it rained yesterday for a temporary period and irrespective of what the weather is like now, that period came to an end. (If it is still raining and hasn’t stopped, we would generally use the present perfect continuous tense and say: “It has been raining since yesterday”.)

Future Functions

Look at these functions of the Future Simple tense (will + bare infinitive)

1. A command or order:
   * Will you sit down and listen!

2. A future possibility or prediction:
   * It’ll probably be too late to do anything by then.
   * I think the weather will improve tomorrow.

3. An offer or promise:
   * I’ll help you with the suitcase.
   * I will always be your friend.

4. A definite future event:
   * The Olympic Games will be held in London.
   * Mark will be 7 next spring.

5. A request:
   * Will you lend me a hand?
   * Will you let me stay with you for a week?

The future form ‘shall’ is often used for suggestions:

Shall we dance?
Occasionally ‘shall’ can perform other functions too.

**Perfect Functions**

The **present perfect** is the most commonly used perfect tense construction in the English language. Although it has many functions we will deal primarily with just four.

A. It describes a state, event or habit that started in the past, and continues to the present and may continue into the future. For example:

- I **have lived** in this house for six years.
- We **haven’t seen** each other since graduation.

B. It describes an event which was completed sometime in the past, but which has some significance to the present. For example:

- I’m not hungry just now. I’ve **just eaten**.
- **Have you eaten** yet?”
- My car **has broken down**. (i.e. it’s not working now)

C. It describes an experience at an unidentified time in the past (usually one which you remember clearly). For example:

- I **have done** a bungee jump.
- **Have you ever seen** a Yeti?

D. It describes the overall experience of doing a certain action, i.e. the action is of repeated nature. For example:

- I **have seen** that film five times.
- He **has been** to many European countries.

**Modal Verb Functions**

**Modal verbs** have very different functions. Of the eleven modal verbs in the English language, we are going to look briefly at two of them: **can** and **could**.
The best way to observe the various functions of these verbs is to consider the specific examples in the following exercise.

**Conditional Functions**

We have dealt with conditionals both in this section and in detail in Module Two. Here is a list of functions commonly performed by the zero, first, second or third conditionals.

A. To talk about past regrets (we sadly can’t turn back time)
   - If I'd met my husband earlier in life, I wouldn't have had so many relationships.

B. To express a sense of relief or satisfaction at the way things turned out in the past
   - If I hadn't exercised daily, I wouldn't have won the championship.

C. To make polite requests
   - If you turned the volume down a little, it would really help me concentrate.

D. To give advice
   - If you brought all the necessary tools, you'd be able to finish the job more quickly

E. To talk about hypothetical situations (an unreal scenario for the present or future)
   - If I were an astronaut, I would take a lot of photographs of Earth from Space.

F. To talk about future possibilities or probabilities
   - If the snowstorm begins tomorrow morning, we'll have to stay inside.

G. To impose a condition
   - I will only be able to give you any advice if you tell me the whole story

H. To make threats
   - If your dog goes trampling on my flowers again, I'll kill it!

I. To give warnings
   - If you don't revise all the material, you'll fail the exam.
J. To talk about someone’s usual behavior
   • Ann never leaves on time unless you keep telling her to hurry up.

K. To talk about general truths (for example, scientific facts)
   • If it is summer in the Northern Hemisphere, it is winter in the Southern Hemisphere.