

English Present Perfect vs Past Simple



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The present perfect and past simple are two of the most commonly confused tenses in English. The key difference is connection to the present — use the present perfect when the past action still has relevance now, and the past simple when the action is completely finished with a clear time in the past.

Present Perfect vs Past Simple	Present Perfect	Past Simple
Structure	have / has + past participle	verb in past form (regular: -ed)
Time reference	no specific time — or unfinished period	specific finished time (yesterday, in 2010, last week)
Connection to present	yes — result or relevance matters now	no — action is complete and finished
Experience focus	used for life experiences up to now	used for specific occasions in the past
News and announcements	✓ used for recent news	✗ not used for recent news
With "just / already / yet"	✓ I have just finished. Already done? Not yet.	✗ not typically used with these words
With "ago / last / in [year]"	✗ not used with finished time markers	✓ I finished it last week. I went in 2019.

Signal Words	Present Perfect	Past Simple
Time words that trigger it	just, already, yet, ever, never, recently, lately, so far, up to now, since, for	yesterday, last week, last year, ago, in [year], when, at [time], on [date]
Example with signal word	I have already eaten lunch.	I ate lunch an hour ago.
Example with since / for	I have lived here since 2018. / I have lived here for six years.	I lived there for two years. (but I left — finished)

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Common Mistakes	Correct	Incorrect
Using past simple for recent news	Scientists have discovered a new planet.	Scientists discovered a new planet. (no time given)
Using present perfect with finished time	I went to Paris last year.	I have been to Paris last year.
Using past simple with yet	Have you finished yet?	Did you finish yet?
Using past simple with ever	Have you ever tried sushi?	Did you ever try sushi?
Using present perfect with when	When did you arrive?	When have you arrived?
Confusing experience vs occasion	I have been to Japan. (experience)	I have gone to Japan last summer. ✗

EXAMPLES

- I have lost my keys. (present perfect — I don't have them now, it's relevant now)
- I lost my keys yesterday. (past simple — specific time, finished event)
- Have you ever visited London? (present perfect — life experience up to now)
- Did you visit London in 2019? (past simple — specific trip, specific year)
- She has worked here since 2020. (present perfect — she still works here now)
- She worked there for five years. (past simple — she no longer works there)
- We have just finished the report. (present perfect with "just" — very recent)
- We finished the report this morning. (past simple — specific time this morning)
- I have never eaten sushi. (present perfect — life experience up to now)
- I didn't eat sushi when I was in Japan. (past simple — specific time, specific situation)
- The CEO has resigned. (present perfect — recent news, no specific time given)
- The CEO resigned on Monday. (past simple — specific day mentioned)
- Have you done your homework yet? (present perfect with "yet" — checking current status)
- Did you do your homework last night? (past simple — asking about a specific time)
- I have known him for ten years. (present perfect — we are still friends now)
- I knew him when we were at school. (past simple — that period is finished)
- She has written three books. (present perfect — total up to now, may write more)
- She wrote three books before she retired. (past simple — finished period of her life)
- They have been married for twenty years. (present perfect — still married now)

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EXAMPLES

- They were married for twenty years. (past simple — implies they are no longer married)
- I have been to New York three times. (present perfect — total life experience)
- I went to New York in 2018. (past simple — specific trip, specific year)
- Have you heard the news? (present perfect — recent, no specific time)
- Did you hear about the accident last night? (past simple — specific time)
- He has broken his leg. (present perfect — it's still broken now, current situation)
- He broke his leg during the match. (past simple — specific event, specific moment)
- I have studied English for five years. (present perfect — I still study now)
- I studied English for five years at school. (past simple — finished, I left school)
- We have already booked the hotel. (present perfect with already — action complete, relevant now)
- We booked the hotel last Tuesday. (past simple — specific day, finished action)
- Have you met my colleague Sarah? (present perfect — life experience, no specific time)
- Did you meet my colleague at the conference? (past simple — specific event)
- The government has announced new policies. (present perfect — recent news)
- The government announced new policies in March. (past simple — specific month)
- I have lived in five different countries. (present perfect — total experience up to now)
- I lived in Germany for three years. (past simple — finished, I no longer live there)
- She has never driven a car. (present perfect — life experience, still true now)
- She didn't drive when she was younger. (past simple — specific period, finished)
- They have not replied yet. (present perfect with yet — still waiting now)
- They didn't reply to my email last week. (past simple — specific time, finished)