

Grammatical Tense, Aspect, and Mood (TAM)

An Overview of Verb Expression

by Todd Warner

Develop your intuition by reading broadly;

resolve suspected problems through study of the language.

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Introduction

*Much of this distillation is sourced from Wikipedia, Grammar
Monster, and a few other places.*

Our languages have finite^[1] grammatical characteristics associated with verb construction.

The three big categories^[2] are ...

1. **Grammatical Tense** - expresses a fixed position in time

- past, present, or future
- generally shown by changes in form to the first verb in a verb phrases
- He walk**ed** (past), He walk**s** (present), He will walk (future)

2. **Grammatical Aspect** - expresses an extension over time

- unitary, continuous, or habitual

- generally shown by adding new verbs to the verb phrase and making changes to the main verb
- He walked**ed** (unitary), He **was** walking (continuous), He **used to** walk (habitual)

3. Grammatical Mood (Modality) - expresses the reality of a state or action

- realis (is actual) or irrealis (is a possibility or necessity)
- statements of fact, of design, of command, etc.
- I **may** walk (possibility), **Walk** faster! (necessity).

Combining tense, aspect, and modality (mood), you get what many describe as the twelve "tenses" of English:

The Twelve 'Tenses'	Past	Present	Future
Simple	she learned	she learns	she will learn
Progressive	she was learning	she is learning	she will be learning
Perfect	she had learned	she has learned	she will have learned
Perfect Progressive	she had been learning	she has been learning	she will have been learning

These constructions are worth exploring as you flesh out the nuance of your narrative, especially when working through the revision process. As you grow in experience, your

intuition may alert you that something is wrong with how you are expressing something.

Diving into these verb constructions Some of the questions to ask oneself: Is my verb usage projecting time as I should for this sentence? Am I appropriately expressing that this event began before the primary storyline and is still ongoing? Or that it ended before the events of the storyline? Or that they haven't happened yet? What context surrounding this piece of prose grounds the reader in the relevant time frame? And for how long? And when does the reader exit that time frame? What if that time frame is a repeating event? Does that change anything? Am I describing a wishful or hypothetical act? Is the prose expressing a conditional action or state of being?

Grammatical Tense^[3]

expresses a fixed position in time
past, present, or future

Present, past, future, and for other languages, nonpast, nonfuture, etc.

- **Present:** He goes.
- **Past:** He went.
- **Future:** He will go.

English only truly has two tenses: past and present. What we call the *future tense* is actually a *grammatical aspect & mood* tweak of the present tense. Fun!

Grammatical Aspect^[4]

expresses an extension over time
unitary, continuous, or habitual

- **Perfective** aspect: looks at an event as a complete action (**unitary**); bounded and occurring once, without reference to any flow of time during the event
- **Imperfective** aspect: views an event as the process of unfolding (**progressive** or **continuous**) or a repeated or **habitual** event
 - by 'habitual' we mean an action performed habitually, ordinarily, or customarily

Perfective and Imperfective are not to be confused with perfect and imperfect verb forms which are shorthand for a combination of tense and aspect. To make things even more confusing, English doesn't quite meet the spec for imperfect verb forms in the same way other languages do.

"While tense relates the time of referent to some other time, commonly the speech event, aspect conveys other temporal information, such as duration, completion, or frequency, as it relates to the time of action." ([Wikipedia](#), "Grammatical_aspect")

— With tense + aspect we get ...

Past simple: past tense

- action happened in the past
- "took"

Past perfect: past tense + perfect aspect

- an action that *happened* and *completed before* another past action
- "had taken"

Past perfect continuous: past tense + perfect aspect + continuous aspect

- action that *was ongoing* in the past until *completed* at another point in the past
- "had been taking"

Past progressive or past continuous: past tense + continuous aspect

- ongoing but not necessarily related to another action or timeframe
- "was/were taking"

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Present simple: present tense

- action is happening
- "take"

Present perfect: present tense + perfect aspect

- action that occurred and *completed* in the past *before* the present
- "have taken"

Present perfect continuous: present tense + perfect aspect + continuous aspect

- action started in the past, is **ongoing**, and continues into the present moment
(may be completed, or maybe not)
- "have been taking"

Present progressive or present continuous: present tense + continuous aspect, but ongoing now

- action *in progress* at the current moment; or action showing future scenarios arranged now; or temporary actions happening now
- "am taking"

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Future simple: future tense

- action will happen
- "will take"

Future perfect: future tense + perfect aspect

- *ongoing* action that will be *completed before* a point in the future
- "will have taken by the time you arrive"

Future perfect continuous: future tense + perfect + continuous aspect

- *ongoing* action that will *continue up until* a point in the future
- "will have been taking turns holding our luggage by the time it arrives" (awkward)

Future progressive or future continuous: future tense + continuous aspect

- an action that will be *happening* at a specific time in the future
- "will be taking tomorrow"

Grammatical Mood^[5]

expresses the reality of a state or action
realis (is actual) or irrealis (is a possibility or necessity)

"[Grammatical Mood] is the use of verbal inflections that allow speakers to express their attitude toward what they are saying (for example, a statement of fact, of desire or hope, of command, etc.). The term is also used more broadly to describe the syntactic expression of modality – that is, the use of verb phrases that do not involve inflection of the verb itself."

(*Wikipedia*, "Grammatical_mood")

Moods:

- English supports three moods: **indicative, imperative, subjunctive**
- Other examples of grammatical mood include: interrogative, injunctive, optative, potential, and more.

Moods can be divided into two broad categories:

- **Realis**^[6]: an evidential mood: factual statements and positive beliefs—**indicative** mood
- **Irrealis**^[7]: non-factual or non-evidentiary, not actually the case, or not known to have happened—**imperative** and **subjunctive** moods

Note: English really only supports distinctive **Indicative**^[6:1], **Subjunctive**^[8], and **Imperative**^[9] moods, though I have also seen some indication that English also supports the **Interrogative**^[10] and **Conditional**^[11] **Moods** at some level. The internet is confusing.

Indicative Mood^[6:2]

The **indicative mood**, or evidential mood states a fact or asks a question. It is the mood of reality and is the mood most often used in our writing.

- Paul is eating an apple.
- John eats apples.
- The sky is blue.
- Why is the sky blue?

Subjunctive Mood^[8:1]

(This is the mood that spurred me to hold this discussion.)

Used when "discussing imaginary or hypothetical events and situations, expressing opinions or emotions, or making polite requests." (Wikipedia)

Examples:

- Indicative: John eats when he **is** hungry.
- Subjunctive: John would eat if he **were** hungry.
- Indicative: She **is** here now.
- Subjunctive: I request **that she be** here by noon.
- Indicative: He **does** his homework.
- Subjunctive: It is crucial **that he do** his homework.
- Indicative: **I am** able to help you.
- Subjunctive: If only **I were** able to help you. (Contrary to fact)
- Indicative: They were at the meeting.
- Subjunctive: If **they were** at the meeting, they would know.
(Hypothetical/Condition)
- Indicative: The report **shows** the error.
- Subjunctive: I propose that the report **show** the actual cost.

Examples of subjunctive mood from recently read works:

- *"If it weren't for your resilience we wouldn't have succeeded," Kaelen said.* —from "Resilience" by Allan Mason
- *If she were an impostor, he thought, she certainly had me fooled.* —from "Gone to the Dogs" by Todd Warner

That second sentence is particularly interesting ...

If she were an impostor, he thought, she certainly had me fooled.

- "If she were" is past subjunctive and sets up a hypothetical.
- "He thought" is past simple.
- "Had ... fooled" is past perfect a state of being completed before the time of thinking.

Not to dwell too long on the past perfect bit, but this could have been written with "fooled me" instead (past simple) without straining the tense structure:

If she were an impostor, he thought, she certainly fooled me.

But this is where writing becomes a bit more artful. "Had me fooled" is idiomatic and really strengthens the impact of the sentence. Both are grammatically correct, but "had me fooled" is stronger.

Imperative Mood^[9:1]

Direct commands, prohibitions, and requests. In many circumstances, using the imperative mood may sound blunt or even rude, so it is often used with care.

It's almost all about the second person and used for telling someone to do something without argument. For example ...

"Pat, do your homework now". "Let's go!" (us) "Go!" (you) Negated with "don't," as in "Don't go!"

Concluding Thoughts

Tense, Aspect, and Mood (TAM) are features of language that we intuitively leverage but never quite master, which is especially evident as we strive for near perfection in our prose, both in art and form. It takes work. A lot of work.

Throughout the revision process, we consistently trip across sentences and passages that we suspect have grammatical issues, but we just can't quite put a finger on precisely what or why. Often, the problems are associated with tense, aspect, or mood. And so, I encourage everyone to periodically carve out some time to eat that cake and drink that tea, and then squirm down the linguistic rabbit hole and study the language. A cursory understanding of the linguistic underpinnings of our language can be helpful in identifying problems with our writing and finding solutions that elevate our craft.

Read a lot. A lot a lot. Reading strengthens your intuition. Study of the language aids your understanding and helps find solutions to problems you discover. Good luck and write well.

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1. a finite verb is a verb that has a subject and shows tense. nonfinite verbs include gerunds, infinitives, and participles. A nonfinite verb is a verb that show no tense. These are not discussed in this document. See also *Grammar Monster*, "non-finite-verbs," https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/non-finite_verbs.htm. ↩
 2. for more on the topic of the Tense-Aspect-Mood (TAM) grammatical categories: *Wikipedia*, "Tense–aspect–mood," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tense–aspect–mood>. ↩
 3. for further reading on the topic of Grammatical Tense: *Wikipedia*, "Grammatical_tense", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammatical_tense. ↩
 4. for further reading on the topic of Grammatical Aspect: *Wikipedia*, "Grammatical_aspect," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammatical_aspect. ↩
 5. for further reading on the topic of Grammatical mood: *Wikipedia* "Grammatical_mood" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammatical_mood and *Grammar Monster* "mood" <https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/mood.htm>. ↩
 6. for more on the topic of Realis Mood, in particular the Indicative Mood: *Wikipedia*, "Realis_mood," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realis_mood. ↩ ↩ ↩
 7. for more on the topic of Irrealis Mood: *Wikipedia*, "Irrealis_mood," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irrealis_mood. ↩
 8. for more on the topic of Irrealis Subjunctive Mood: *Wikipedia*, "Subjunctive_mood," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subjunctive_mood. ↩ ↩
 9. for more on the topic of Irrealis Imperative Mood: *Wikipedia*, "Imperative_mood," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperative_mood. ↩ ↩
 10. for more on the topic of Irrealis Interrogative Mood: *Wikipedia*, "Interrogative_mood," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interrogative_mood. ↩ ↩
 11. for more on the topic of Irrealis Conditional Mood: *Wikipedia*, "Conditional_mood," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conditional_mood. ↩ ↩