



Tikrit University

College of Education for Women

English Department

Subject : Grammar

{First and Third Year}

Lecturer: Sara Muayad Sultan

sara.m.sultan@tu.edu.iq

Past Simple Tense

The Past Simple tense is sometimes called the "preterit tense". We can use several tenses and forms to talk about the past, but the Past Simple tense is the one we use most often.

In this lesson we look at the **structure** and **use** of the Past Simple tense, followed by a **quiz** to check your understanding.

How do we make the Past Simple tense?

There are two basic structures for the Past Simple tense:

1. Positive sentences

subject	+	main verb
		Past Simple

2. Negative and question sentences

subject	+	auxiliary <i>do</i>	+	main verb
		conjugated in Past Simple		
		did		base

Look at these examples with the main verbs *go* (irregular) and *work* (regular):

	subject	auxiliary verb		main verb	
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	subject	auxiliary verb		main verb	
+	I			went	to school.
	You			worked	very hard.
-	She	did	not	go	with me.
	We	did	not	work	yesterday.
?	Did	you		go	to London?
	Did	they		work	at home?

From the above table, notice the following points...

For positive sentences:

- There is **no auxiliary verb**.
- The main verb is conjugated in the Past Simple, invariable: *-ed (or irregular)*

For negative and question sentences:

- The auxiliary is conjugated in the Past Simple, invariable: *did*
- The main verb is invariable in base form: *base*
- For negative sentences, we insert **not** between the auxiliary verb and main verb.
- For question sentences, we **exchange** the subject and the auxiliary verb.

Emphatic did

Normally, for positive sentences we do not use the auxiliary *did*. But if we want to

emphasize (stress) something, or contradict something, we may use it. For example: "I didn't use a spellchecker but I did use a dictionary." Here are some more examples:

- "Why didn't you go to the party?" / "I did go."
- It did seem a bit strange.
- After drinking it I did in fact feel better.

Past Simple with main verb *be*

The structure of the Past Simple with the main verb *be* is:

subject	+	main verb <i>be</i>
		conjugated in Past Simple
		was, were

Look at these examples with the main verb *be*:

	subject	main verb <i>be</i>		
+	I, he/she/it	was		here.
	You, we, they	were		in London.
-	I, he/she/it	was	not	there.
	You, we, they	were	not	happy.

	subject	main verb <i>be</i>		
?	Was	I, he/she/it		right?
	Were	you, we, they		late?

From the above table, notice the following points...

- There is **no auxiliary verb**, even for questions and negatives.
- The main verb (be) is conjugated in the Past Simple: *was, were*
- For negative sentences, we insert **not** after the main verb.
- For question sentences, we **exchange** the subject and the main verb.

How do we use the Past Simple tense?

We use the Past Simple tense to talk about an action or a situation - an event - in the past. The event can be **short** or **long**.

Here are some **short** events with the Past Simple:

The car **exploded** at 9.30am yesterday.
 She **went** to the door.
 We **did** not **hear** the telephone.
Did you **see** that car?

past	present	future
The action is in the past.		

Here are some **long** events with the Past Simple tense:

I **lived** in Bangkok for 10 years.
The Jurassic period **lasted** about 62 million years.
We **did** not **sing** at the concert.
Did you **watch** TV last night?

past	present	future
The action is in the past.		

Notice that it does not matter how long ago the event is: it can be a few minutes or seconds in the past, or millions of years in the past. Also it does not matter how long the event is. It can be a few milliseconds (car explosion) or millions of years (Jurassic period). We use the Past Simple tense when:

- the event is **in the past**
- the event is **completely finished**
- we say (or understand) the **time** and/or **place** of the event

In general, if we say the past **time** or **place** of the event, we must use the Past Simple tense; we cannot use the present perfect.

Here are some more examples:

- I **lived** in that house when I was young.
- He **didn't like** the movie.
- What **did** you **eat** for dinner?
- John **drove** to London on Monday.
- Mary **did** not **go** to work yesterday.
- **Did** you **play** tennis last week?
- I **was** at work yesterday.
- We **were** not late (for the train).
- **Were** you angry?