Narrative Tenses

Narrative tenses are **used to tell stories and relate past events**. They primarily consist of the past simple, past continuous, past perfect, and past perfect continuous tenses. Understanding these tenses is crucial for constructing clear and engaging narratives. Here's a detailed explanation of each:

Past Simple

Usage: Describes completed actions or events that happened at a specific time in the past.
Form: **Verb + -ed for regular verbs (e.g., walked, jumped), and irregular verb forms for irregular verbs (e.g., went, saw).**
Example:

- "She opened the door."

Past Continuous

Usage: Indicates an ongoing action in the past that was happening at a specific time or was interrupted by another action.
Form: **Was/were + verb + -ing.**
Example:

- "She was reading a book when the phone rang."

Past Perfect

Usage: Refers to an action that was completed before another action or time in the past.
Form: **Had + past participle.**
Example:

- "She had finished her homework before she went to the cinema."

Past Perfect Continuous

Usage: Shows an action that began in the past and continued up to another point in the past.
Form: **Had been + verb + -ing.**
Example:

- "She had been studying for two hours when her friend called."

Combining Tenses in Narratives

In storytelling, these tenses are often used together to set scenes, develop characters, and create a timeline of events:

Setting the scene: Past continuous is often used to describe the ongoing background activity when the story unfolds: "It was raining outside."

Main narrative and actions: Past simple is typically used for the sequence of events: "She went to the store."

Prior events: Past perfect gives background information or events that happened before the main narrative: "She realized she had seen the man before."

Duration or cause of past events: Past perfect continuous adds depth by explaining what had been happening over a period before a specific moment or what caused a later event in the story: "She was tired because she had been running."



Narrative Clarity
The choice of tense affects how readers perceive the timeline and causality of events in a story. Clear use of narrative tenses helps in building suspense, providing background information, and enhancing the overall storytelling experience.

Narrative Tenses Exercise 1:

Choose the correct answer.

1. What is the primary use of the past simple tense?
a) Describing ongoing actions
b) Describing completed actions
c) Describing actions that will happen

2. Which tense is used to describe an ongoing action in the past?
a) Past perfect
b) Past continuous
c) Past simple

3. I ____ the email before the meeting began.
a) was sending
b) sent
c) had sent

4. While I ____ to work, I ____ an accident.
a) was driving, saw
b) drove, had seen
c) had driven, saw

5. I ____ her since we ____ school.
a) hadn't seen, left
b) didn't see, had left
c) was not seeing, left

6. They ____ when the earthquake ____.
a) were sleeping, struck
b) slept, had struck
c) had slept, struck

7. He ____ he ____ the wrong train.
a) was realising, took
b) realised, had taken
c) had realised, took

8. We ____ for hours before we ____ the right path.
a) are walking, found
b) were walking, found
c) had been walking, found

9. Before yesterday, I ____ never ____ such a delicious meal.
a) had, eaten
b) was, eating
c) ate, had eaten

10. While I ____ for the bus, I ____ my friend.
a) waited, called
b) was waiting, called
c) had waited, called

Narrative Tenses Exercise 2:

Complete the story with either the past simple, the past pefect, the past continuous or the past perfect continuous form of the verbs in brackets.



On my first archaeology expedition, I _____ **(1: join)** past simple) a team that _____ **(2: search)**, past perfect continuous) for ancient artifacts in Egypt. We _____ **(3: set,** past simple) up camp near the pyramids and _____ **(4: start**, past simple) our exploration at dawn. While we _____ **(5: dig**, past continuous), I _____ **(6: find**, past simple) something unusual in the sand. It _____ **(7: be**, past simple) a small, ornate box that _____ **(8: appear**, past perfect) to be from the Pharaonic period. I _____ **(9: realise**, past simple) we _____ **(10: make**, past perfect continuous) an incredible discovery.

Narrative tenses: answer key

Grammar practice · B2 Upper-intermediate

Where two or more answers are given, any of them is correct.

Exercise 1

1. b) Describing completed actions
2. b) Past continuous
3. c) had sent
4. a) was driving, saw
5. a) hadn't seen, left
6. a) were sleeping, struck
7. b) realised, had taken
8. c) had been walking, found
9. a) had, eaten
10. b) was waiting, called

Exercise 2

(1) joined
(2) had been searching
(3) set
(4) started
(5) were digging
(6) found
(7) was
(8) had appeared
(9) realised
(10) had made

Corrections to the printed pages

Exercise 2, gap 10 should say past perfect, not past perfect continuous.