

Lesson 50.

Sequence of tenses in English sentences



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In complex English sentences, the tense of the verb of the subordinate clause depends on the tense of the main sentence.

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If in a complex sentence the verb of the main sentence is in one of the past tenses (most often in Past Simple), then the verb of the subordinate clause must also appear in one of the past tenses or in the Future in the Past tense.

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It is especially difficult when the verb of the main sentence is expressed by a verb in one of the past tense forms. In this case, the present and future tense forms of verbs cannot be used in subordinate clauses, although we are talking about actions that are performed in the present or will be performed in the future.

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If the verb in the main clause is in one of the past tenses, then the verb of the subordinate clause must also be in one of the past tenses.

In such cases, the sequence of tenses rule allows three main options:

1) If the action in the subordinate clause occurs simultaneously with the action in the main clause, then you need to use Past Simple or Past Continuous:

They told us, "We are going to the library."

They told us they were going to the library.

2) If the action in the subordinate clause precedes the action in the main clause, then the verb in the subordinate clause is used in Past Perfect or Past Perfect Continuous:

We were told, "It was raining a lot."

We were told that it had been raining a lot.

3) If the action in the subordinate clause follows the action in the main clause, then you need to use one of the Future-in-the-Past tenses:

She said: "I will try to get the highest mark on the exam."

She said she would try to get the highest mark on the exam.

Exceptions:

1) The tense in the subordinate clause may remain unchanged if the exact time is indicated in it:

He told us, "I took part in the Moscow Olympic games in 1980."

He told us he took part in the Moscow Olympic games in 1980.

2) If we are talking about a well-known fact:

Newton proved that bodies attract each other.

He knew that ice melts.

3) Subordinate clauses use the modal verbs **should**, **must**, **ought**:

They said that he should go home.

Sequence of the Past and Present tenses

1. Past tense and Present Simple (regular action)

Let's say we have a sentence:

He thinks she drives a car.

As you can see, both parts of this sentence are in present tense.

But, how can you say it in the past tense?

Wrong: He thought she drives a car.

Right: He thought she drove a car.

Let's look at a couple more examples in the table below:

Present Tense	Past Tense
He thinks she lives in Moscow.	He thought she lived in Moscow.
She says that she works there.	She said that she worked there.

Sequence of the Past and Present tenses

2. Past tense and Present Continuous (the process that is currently taking place)

For example, we have a sentence in present tense:

He thinks she is sleeping.

Both parts of the sentence are in the present tense: at the moment he thinks she is currently sleeping.

But, how can you say it in the past tense?

Wrong: He thought she is sleeping.

Right: He thought she was sleeping.

Let's look at a couple more examples in the table below:

Present Tense	Past Tense
They see that she is dancing.	They saw that she was dancing.
He hears that we are singing.	He heard that we were singing.

Sequence of the Past and Future tenses

For example, we have a sentence:

She knows that he will come.

Now imagine the situation: The girl tells her friend that last week she knew that he would come.

Wrong: She knew that he will come.

Right: She knew that he would come.

Let's look at a couple more examples in the table below:

Present Tense	Past Tense
She knows that he will call her.	She knew that he would call her.
They think that they will be flying.	They thought that they would be flying.

Sequence of the Past tense and Past

This rule applies if in the subordinate clause the action took place earlier than in the main one:

He said that she went away.

Both parts of such a sentence are in the Past Simple tense. And, in this case we conclude that the actions take place at the same time. But, if we want to show that one action took place before another happened, then we need to change the time in the second part. In this case, in the second part of the sentence, we use the Past Perfect tense, which shows that this action took place earlier:

He said that she had gone away.

Let's look at some examples in the table below:

Past tense (direct speech):	Past tense (indirect speech)
He said, "I wrote a book".	He said that he had written a book.
He said, "They flew".	He said that they had flown.
They said, "He has done homework".	They said that he had done homework.

Sequence of the Past tense and Modal verbs

Modal verbs, unlike other verbs, do not indicate an action (go, read, study), but show an attitude towards these actions (I must go, I can read, I should study).

When matching tenses, we put them in the past tense:

can - could

may - might

have to - had to

For example, we have a sentence in the present tense:

He knows that she can speak English.

By putting the first part in the past tense, we cannot leave the modal verb in the present tense.

Wrong: He knew that she can speak English.

Right: He knew that she could speak English.

.Let's look at a couple more examples in the table below:

Present Tense	Past tense
He knows that she can swim.	He knew that she could swim.
They think that he have to work.	They thought that he had to work.

General table of the sequence of tenses in the English language

It was	Change to
Present Simple He thinks that she works.	Past Simple He thought that she worked.
Present Continuous She knows that they are training.	Past Continuous She knew that they were training.
Will She thinks that she will read the book.	Would She thought that she would read the book.
Past Simple He said, "They called".	Past Perfect He said that they had called.
Present Perfect They said, "We have cooked dinner".	Past Perfect They said that they had cooked dinner.
Modal verbs – can, may, have to They think that she can drive.	Modal verbs – could, might, had to They thought that she could drive.