

Englische Seite

The right time ... for the right tense!

One of the key aspects of learning a language is without doubt learning grammar, especially the different time forms. As grammar is actually in every sentence you want to say or write, the basic point is to learn the grammar topic in context when choosing the right form of the present, past or future. It goes without saying that having the right vocabulary available is absolutely essential, but if the goal should be to speak fluently and accurately, it is important to know something about the grammatical structures and functions, too. However, don't focus on rules too much. Due to the fact that the English grammar is full of exceptions, they should more or less be seen as guidelines.

Let's start with the present tense. Keep in mind that the present time in English can be expressed in two ways – either using the present simple or the present continuous form. The present simple is the most frequent verb form in English. It is used to give general facts or to describe things that are always true, such as:

New York City is composed of five boroughs.

It takes the moon 27.3 days to go around the earth once.

I always go to work by car.

In contrast to this, the present continuous describes an event that takes place over a time period. The most common function refers to actions happening now and around now. Let's think of example sentences in this tense:

James is very busy, he's working on an important project at the moment.

We're having lunch right now, could you please call back later?

Look outside, the sun's shining.

Apart from that, the same tense is used to talk about fixed arrangements in the near future:

I'm meeting Heidi at eight. We're going out for dinner.

I'm flying home tonight.

There are several ways to talk about the time ahead in English. What is the most natural way to say it? In case you want to express spontaneous ideas and decisions made now, at the time of speaking, then use the will-future.

Are you hungry? Come in and sit down. I'll get you something to eat.

I haven't got time to do that now. I promise I'll do it later.

It's cold in here. I'll better close the window.

Let's have a look at another form of the future. In case you want to talk about intentions and decisions, you've already made about actions in the future, then use the going to-future.

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The company is going to launch this product next month.

We're going to travel to New York at Easter.

I'm going to tell you something about our latest product range.

The same form is also common in spoken English when making predictions about the future on what you can see now:

Look, how well they're playing today. I'm sure they are going to win the game.

He's not happy at work. I guess he's going to quit his job.

The right use of the different tenses is not always easy, especially when it comes to the **present perfect**. Although this tense is a tense of the present, it has a strong connection to the past. It looks back from the present to past events. It is for example used to talk about recent changes:

The euro has fallen against the dollar.

He's just left the office. Could you please call again tomorrow?

It is also used to describe unfinished events and situations up to the present or in connection with "ever" and "never":

I haven't been to Shanghai yet.

Are you sure you've never watched an American sitcom?

The right use of the past simple is much easier. This tense is used to tell facts about an action completed in the past. Finished. Over.

I checked the figures very carefully last week.

I'm sorry, I wasn't in the office when you called yesterday.

Basically, it is much more important that it sounds natural what you're saying, rather than following grammar rules. Real learning comes with a lot of input. Therefore, a good way to learn the language is to listen to people speaking and practice as much as possible. Watch movies, read magazines or books and your mind will start to understand *subconsciously*. And don't forget - native speakers make mistakes as well - now and then!

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