Past perfect

The past perfect tense is used to show that an action or state happened before another specified time in the past and is therefore used to sequence these past events. The time in the past that the action or state happened before must either be stated or be known by the listener. We can specify a time in the past by using a completed past time word, or with a simple past time clause.

How to form the past perfect

POSITIVE

SUBJECT	+	HAD	+	PAST PARTICIPLE
I / You / We / They He / She / It	+	had	+	played eaten

Contractions: I'd / You'd / He'd / She'd / It'd / We'd / They'd

Positive examples:

I'd eaten five tacos by the time they arrived. • They had tidied their house before I went round.

NEGATIVE

SUBJECT	+	HAD NOT	+	PAST PARTICIPLE
I / You / We / They He / She / It	+	had not	+	played eaten

Contractions: I'd not / You'd not / He'd not / She'd not / It'd not / We'd not / They'd not
I hadn't / You hadn't / He hadn't / She hadn't / It hadn't / We hadn't / They hadn't

Negative examples:

He'd not finished the last time I spoke to him. • They hadn't eaten anything when they got here.

QUESTIONS

HAD	+	SUBJECT	+	PAST PARTICIPLE ?
Had	+	I / you / we / they he / she / it	+	played? eaten?

Questions examples:

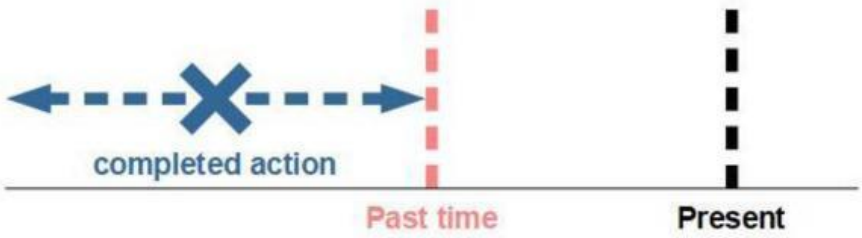
What had you eaten to make you so sick? • Had you spoken to Paul before the meeting?

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Sequencing past events

The past perfect shows that an event happened before another time in the past.



We use the past perfect to show that an event happened before a certain time in the past. The past time can be specified using a preposition followed by the past time:

- *By 8 o'clock last night, I had sent more than fifty emails.*
- *Ronaldo had scored more than thirty goals before the Christmas break.*
- *I hadn't seen him since school.*
- *She had never eaten pizza until her trip to Italy.*

We can also specify the past time using the simple past tense. Sometimes, the simple past tense is contained in a time clause (e.g., when, before, by the time, until) and the main clause contains the past perfect tense:

- *I had already eaten when he called.*
- *Before we arrived, the meeting had already started.*
- *By the time we got to the cinema, the movie had already begun.*
- *He had never travelled abroad until he joined this company.*

Sometimes, the past perfect tense is contained in a time clause (e.g., after, once, as soon as) and the main clause contains the simple past tense:

- *She went to bed after she had finished her work.*
- *Once he had completed the assignment, he went to sleep.*
- *As soon as she had finished cooking, they started eating.*

Either way, the past perfect shows which of two past events happened first, while the simple past shows which event happened later. In the examples below, which all use when time clauses, the past perfect must be used to show which event happened first. If the simple past were used instead of the past perfect, it would suggest the two events happened simultaneously:

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- *When we arrived at the station, the train had already left.*
- *When I saw you last week, I had spoken to John.*
- *She had already sold her house when we visited her.*

However, if the later event is introduced with a *before* time clause, or the earlier event is introduced with an *after* time clause, then the sequence of events is obvious. In this case, it is optional whether you use the past perfect for the earlier event or the simple past:

- *The burglar had escaped **before** the police arrived. / The burglar escaped **before** the police arrived.*
- *We got there **after** Ian and Kerry had left. / We got there **after** Ian and Kerry left.*
- *They had finished their homework **before** they went out. / They finished their homework **before** they went out.*

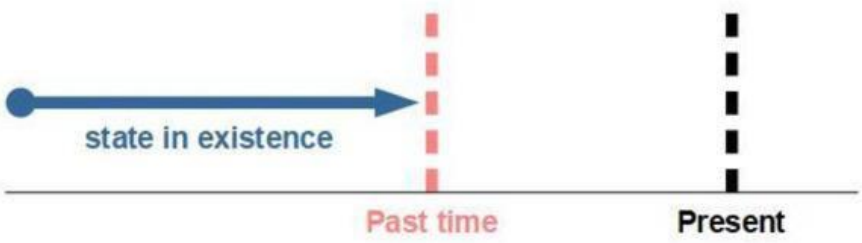
Past reasons & explanations

The past perfect can be used to show a reason why something happened in the past or an explanation for a state:

- *I was very hungry because I hadn't eaten at the airport.*
- *She was angry because her husband had left her.*
- *The heatwave had affected the tracks, so the trains were cancelled.*

Past states

The past perfect can show that a state existed up until a certain point in the past:



- *They had lived in Prague for five years when they moved back to England.*
- *Chris and April had been married for 12 years before they got divorced.*
- *They had known each other for seven years before the argument.*

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Past events at a specific time

Remember that we only use the past perfect in relation to another time or event in the past. We don't use the past perfect with completed past time words, so if you are speaking about an event in the past that happened at a specific time, use the simple past:

- ~~*I* **had visited** *the British Museum* **last year**~~. *I* **visited** *the British Museum* **last year**.
- ~~*My parents* **had gone** *to a new restaurant* **last night**~~. *My parents* **went** *to a new restaurant* **last night**.
- ~~*Paul* **had won** *a gold tournament* **in 2017**~~. *Paul* **won** *a golf tournament* **in 2017**.

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