NARRATE PAST EVENTS

Understanding how to describe events across different time frames is a fundamental aspect of mastering any language, including English. When we discuss events, we often need to report them in the past, present, or future.

This ability not only enhances clarity but also enriches communication, allowing us to share experiences, make plans, and reflect on past occurrences. In this section, we will delve into the intricacies of reporting past events, a crucial skill for anyone aiming to achieve fluency in English.

We use narrative tenses to talk about the past. We can use them to tell a story or to describe past events, including personal anecdotes.

- *When I **lived** on the island, I **enjoyed** walking on the beach in the early morning with Bonnie - my best friend and my dog.*
- *Britain **declared** war on Germany on 3 September 1939 after Germany **had attacked** Poland two days earlier. Britain **had been trying** to negotiate a peaceful settlement.*

The four narrative tenses are the past simple, past continuous, past perfect and past perfect continuous and one or more of these can be used in a sentence.

- *We **were walking** as usual one day, when all of a sudden, Bonnie **shot off**. She **started** to bark furiously. I **saw** a man sleeping face down on the sand. Bonnie **continued** to bark, but the man **didn't wake up**. He **wasn't sleeping**; he **was** dead. It **was** clear that the storm **had washed up** the body.*

Past simple

We can use the past simple for actions that started and finished in the past, for example a series of events in someone's life.

- *Nelson Mandela **was born** in 1918. He **became** the first black President of South Africa. He **spent** 27 years in prison in his battle against the system of apartheid.*

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The past simple is often used in stories and dialogue, too.

*- When Bobby **went down** for breakfast, Matt **looked up**.*

*- "**Did you hear** the storm last night?"*

*- Bobby **didn't answer**.*

*- "Your brother **went out** last night. He **didn't come back**. Do you know where **he went**?"*

*- Bobby's heart **sank**. She knew exactly where Dan **had gone**...*

Past continuous

We use the past continuous for background information and to describe a scene or situation that continued for some time.

- *At 6 o'clock that evening Dan **was** still **missing**. Bobby **was feeling** worried.*
- *Bonnie **was barking** loudly.*

Past simple and past continuous

We often use the past simple and past continuous together when one action interrupts another.

- *I **was strolling** along the beach one day when suddenly, Bonnie **ran off**.*
- *It **was** still **raining** when Bobby **woke up** the next morning. Dan **was sitting** at the table when she **went** into the kitchen.*

Past simple and past perfect

We can use the past perfect with the past simple together in a sentence to describe an action that happened before another past action.

- *I quickly **realised** that the storm the previous night **had washed up** the body.*
- *Bobby **knew** that Dan **hadn't wanted** to come home but she also knew that **he hadn't had** any other option.*

Past perfect continuous

We use this tense to describe something that has been happening over a long period of time.

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- *I could tell that the body **had been lying** on the beach for several hours because the man's clothes were dry.*
- *Britain **had been trying** to negotiate a peaceful settlement between Poland and Germany.*

<u>Take note: linking devices</u>

When we tell a story in the past, we often use linking words or phrases to join two or more sentences or clauses. This helps the narrative to flow in a more interesting and natural way. Some linking phrases and words show a sequence of events or actions.

- *Nelson Mandela never gave up on his struggle against apartheid. **As the years went by**, his fame spread to every corner of the world. **In the end**, under enormous global pressure, the government had no option but to release him.*

Other linking words and phrases that signal order of events are: *First of all …, Then …, Next …, Finally …, After that …, After several months/days/hours/weeks …, By the time …, All of a sudden*

We also use linking words and phrases in dialogue to indicate interest in what is being said and to keep the conversation flowing.

- So how did you meet your wife?
*- Well, it's a strange story: **what happened was** I was training as a paramedic and one day we got a call to a house in East Street.*
- Oh, my cousin lives there! …
*- **Really**? … **So, anyway**, when we arrived in East Street, another ambulance was already there!*
*- **So what happened**?*
- Sylvie and I treated the patient together. The rest is history!

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ALL NARRATIVE TENSES

Reference:

BBC Learning English. (2026) Grammar Reference. Narrative tenses. BBC Learning English. Recovered from: https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/course/intermediate/unit-20/tab/grammar