

Ask and Talk About Life Experiences

The Big Idea (in one line)

Present Perfect = headline (life experience up to now, no date)

Past Simple = story details (finished events at a known time)

Headline:

I've visited Japan twice.

Details:

I went in 2018 and 2022. I stayed in Kyoto and visited Nara.

Present Perfect for Life Experience

Form

have/has + past participle

I/you/we/they have seen...

He/she has seen...

Contractions (sound more natural):

I've, you've, she's, we've, they've.

Meaning

Use it to talk about experiences at any time up to now without saying when they happened.

I've tried Ethiopian coffee.

She's never ridden a motorbike.

Have you ever met a famous author?

Common adverbs with Present Perfect

ever / never:

Have you ever...? I've never...

just (very recent), already (earlier than expected), yet (in questions/negatives)

I've just finished the book.

She's already seen that film.

Have you finished yet? / I haven't finished yet.

British English note: *We often use just/already/yet with the present perfect (I've just eaten).*

American English often prefers past simple (*I just ate*).

Both are correct; choose one style.

Been vs Gone

been to = visited and returned:

I've been to Paris twice.

gone to = has gone and is still there:

He's gone to the store. (He isn't here now.)

Past Simple for Specific Details

Form

verb + -ed (regular) or second form (irregular): *went, saw, met...*

Meaning

Use it for finished events with a finished time reference (yesterday, last year, in 2019, two days ago).

I went to Italy last summer.

We stayed in a small B&B near the beach.

Time expressions that signal Past Simple

yesterday · last night/week/year · in 2015 · two years ago · on Tuesday · when I was a child

Put Them Together in Real Conversation

Pattern 1: Experience → Details

Present perfect headline:

I've tried rock climbing.

Past simple details:

I tried it in 2023 with my cousin. We went to an indoor wall.

Pattern 2: Negative → First time

I've never flown alone. → The first time I flew alone was in 2021.

Pattern 3: Numbers + frequency

I've visited Spain three times. → I went twice for work and once for a holiday.

Memory hook: PP = Past to Present (bridge); PS = Point in time (dot).

Useful Phrases & Discourse Markers

Introduce an experience:

I've been to... · I've tried... · I've never... · I've always wanted to...

Ask about experience:

Have you ever...? · How many times have you...?

Move to details:

The last time I went was... · Back in 2019... · When I was there...

Add sequence:

First... then... after that... finally...

Reactions:

No way! · That sounds amazing. · What happened next?

Common Mistakes & Quick Fixes

I've gone to Paris last year. → I went to Paris last year. (time is finished → past simple)

Did you ever eat sushi? → Have you ever eaten sushi? (British English for life experience)

I have been yesterday. → I went yesterday. (yesterday = finished time → past simple)

I have seen that movie last night. → I saw that movie last night.

I've been in Paris in 2022. → I was in Paris in 2022. / I went to Paris in 2022.

Mini-Stories: Model Paragraphs

Model A (Travel)

I've been to Thailand a few times. The last time I went was in 2022. I stayed in Chiang Mai for a week and took a cooking class. I tried khao soi for the first time and loved it.

Model B (Food)

I've never cooked Ethiopian food, but I've tried it. I went to a small restaurant in London two years ago. We shared injera and a spicy lentil dish—amazing flavors.

Model C (Meeting People)

Have you ever met an author? I have—once. I met her at a book signing in 2018. She signed my book and we chatted for a minute about the characters in her latest novel.

Reference:

Buckley, D. (2025). Talking About Experiences in English: Present Perfect and Past Simple Made Easy. Man Writes. Retrieved from: <https://manwrites.com/talking-about-experiences-in-english-present-perfect-and-past-simple-made-easy/>