

Talking about past events and situations

Present perfect vs
simple past*

* Based on: Swan, M. & Walter, C. *How English Works*. Oxford: OUP, 1997.

Simple present perfect

The simple present perfect connects the past and the present. It is used for finished actions that are important now: they have results now or are news.

I can't walk – I've hurt my leg.

Have you heard? He's arrived!

Present perfect and past: news

A piece of news is often announced with the present perfect. The word *just* can be used to say that something has happened very recently.

A light passenger plane has crashed in Surrey.

Andy's just found a flat.

When more details are given, the simple past is normally used.

I've had a terrible day at the office. My secretary went home sick and we lost three major contracts.

Present perfect and past: time words

Using the present perfect or the simple past can depend on the kind of time expression used.

With expressions referring to a **finished time** (eg., *yesterday, last week, then, when*) the simple past is normally used.

With expressions referring to '**any time up to now**' the present perfect is normally used.

I saw Helen yesterday

Have you seen Rob recently?

You were here last week, weren't you?

She studied Chinese when she was at University.

Just now is used with the simple past:

She has just phoned

She phoned just now

Note: we can think of a finished time even without using a time expression. We can think of 'any time up to now' even we don't explicitly say so.

Did you see Iron Man? [It was on TV]

Have you seen Iron Man? [ever]

Present perfect: situations 'up to now'

The present perfect is used to talk about situations continuing up to now, especially when we say how long they lasted.

Alex has worked with children all her life.

He went to Rome on holiday five years ago, and he's lived there ever since.

The present perfect is often used for actions repeated up to now. Compare:

Ben's been to Africa several times this year

I went to Africa three times last year.

With most verbs the present perfect progressive can also be used:

Have you been waiting long?

Present perfect progressive or simple?

To talk about recent long actions and situations: the present perfect progressive looks at the continuing situation itself; the present perfect simple says that something is **completed**.

I've been reading your book; I'm enjoying it.
I've read your book. (=I've finished)

The present perfect simple can be used to say **how often** something has happened.

I've played tennis three times this week.
I've been playing a lot of tennis recently.

The present perfect simple is preferred for **permanent or long-lasting situations**.

He's been living in Denmark for the last few months.
I've lived here all my life.