Section 4  past tenses

tense and aspect: more academic grammars distinguish ‘tense’ (the use of verb forms to indicate time) from ‘aspect’ (the use of verb forms to convey such meanings as continuation or completion). For pedagogic purposes, we find it convenient to use the term ‘tense’ for both categories.

So-called ‘past’ forms can signal other kinds of remoteness besides distance in time – for example social distance, uncertainty, indefiniteness or unreality.

‘Perfect’ forms are also used to talk about past events, but are dealt with separately in Section 5.

Pronunciation: the unstressed forms of auxiliary was and were can be difficult for some students to hear. The ‘Pronunciation for grammar’ exercises will help with this.

possible further activities

The text is provided simply as an introductory piece of interesting past-tense reading material. It is probably best if students read it by themselves with dictionaries, perhaps out of class. There is no need for comprehension questions or other exercises.

language notes

The pronunciation of -ed depends on what comes before it:
– /t/ after an unvoiced sound like /p/, /k/ or /ʃ/
– /d/ after a vowel or a voiced consonant like /b/, /g/, /m/, /l/ etc
– /ɪd/ after /t/ and /d/.

The distinction between /t/ and /d/ is unimportant except for learners who want a very high level of accuracy in pronunciation, but students should be clear about when to pronounce the ending /ɪd/. The ‘Pronunciation for grammar’ exercises will help with this.

Final /d/ may be difficult to pronounce or perceive after a consonant, or difficult to pronounce at all, for students whose languages have different phonetic structures from English (e.g. Spanish, Italian, Chinese or Japanese). The ‘Pronunciation for grammar’ exercises will help.

British English illogically doubles /l/ before -ed in unstressed syllables. American English doesn’t normally do this:
BrE: travelled  AmE: traveled

possible further activities

**Spelling** Say aloud some of the verbs in Exercises 2 and 3. Students have to tell you, as quickly as possible, how many letters each one has.

**Extending Exercise 4** Say aloud some or all of the verbs in Exercise 4. Students have to tell you the past forms as quickly as possible.

**Learning verb forms** Learning by heart is an unfashionable activity in these ‘communicative’ times, but it can be very useful for students to memorise the forms of common irregular verbs: ‘come–came–come’, ‘begin–began–begun’ etc.

An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use.

➔ Section 4 continues
language notes

Students’ difficulties with the simple past are parallel to those with the simple present (see notes on Section 2):

*Where you went yesterday?*
*What did she want?*
*I no understood.*

And their difficulties with the past progressive are parallel to those with the present progressive (see notes on Section 2):

*When I looked out of the window it snowed.*
*What was studying your brother?*
*What your brother was studying?*

possible further activities

**Memory test: simple past** Do 20 or 30 different actions (stand on a chair; close your eyes; pick up a book; open a window; …). Students work in groups and try to write down everything you did (time limit five minutes).

**OR:** Get a student to do the actions.

**Quiz: simple past** Students work in groups to prepare questions beginning ‘When did …?’.

(‘When did the second world war end?’ ‘When did Germany win the World Cup?’) They ask the class their questions. Answers should use ‘ago’. This can be done as a contest, with one group asking questions, the rest of the class writing their answers, and the winner perhaps getting a small prize.

**Hundred-word stories** Students (perhaps for homework) write the story of a film, book, play or musical in 100 words (using past tenses).

**Simple past questions** Students prepare 20 or more questions about somebody’s early childhood (‘Where did you live?’ ‘Did you travel a lot?’ ‘Did you like school?’ …). When they are ready they interview each other and write reports.

**Split sentences: simple past questions** Write out some past sentences beginning with question words on cards; then cut them into three parts, shuffle them, and give one to each student. Students have to walk round saying (not showing) what is on their cards, and trying to form groups of three to make possible sentences. There may be many possible right answers; it doesn’t matter if a combination is silly. Some suggestions:

*Why | did Alice | climb out of the window?*
*When | did the President | open the new hospital?*
*Why | did your dog | bite the postman?*
*What time | did Grandma | arrive at the airport?*
*How | did that horse | get into the garden?*
*Why | did everybody | start dancing?*
*When | did Shakespeare | get married?*
*How | did the cat | get onto the roof?*
*When | did Christopher Columbus | reach America?*

**Invented pasts** Students invent imaginary pasts for themselves, and then interview each other. (‘Where did you live?’ ‘In a palace in Egypt.’)

**Class interview** Prepare questions as above, but a longer list. Bring somebody into the classroom (for example a colleague, a friend, a student from another class); students ask their questions and write reports on what they have found out.

**Mime: past progressive** Students mime what they were doing at 10.00 last night (true or not). The class have to guess what is being mimed. (‘You were dancing.’)
**Memory test: past progressive**  Give students cards with the names of continuous actions. For example:
- read, write, dance, sit on the floor, walk, scratch your head, clap your hands, sing
Shout ‘Start!’ Students do their actions and continue for about two minutes until you shout ‘Stop!’, observing each other’s actions at the same time. They then have to try to write down what everybody was doing when you shouted ‘Stop!’: (‘When you shouted ‘Stop!’, Makoto was sitting on the floor, Daniel was reading …’).

**Lies**  Students say what they were doing at 10 o’clock yesterday evening (or some other suitable time). They can tell the truth or lie. The others have to decide whether they are telling the truth or not.

**Vocabulary expansion: physical activities**  Teach or revise a number of words for common physical activities. For example:
- blink, cough, sneeze, blow one’s nose, scratch one’s head/arm etc, hum, chew, jump, hop, stand on one leg, clap, wave
Start doing one of these things, telling one of the students to clap after a few moments. As soon as he/she claps, do something else. Students report twice what happened, like this: When Susie clapped, you were coughing. When Susie clapped, you waved.

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**possible further activities**

**Repeated past activities**  Ask students to tell you, or each other, three things that they did sometimes / often / a lot when they were younger. One of them can be a lie; the others have to decide which.

**Negatives**  Think of a historical figure. Students write five things that he/she didn’t often do, or never did (time limit three minutes).

**OR:** as above, but students write about their parents or grandparents.

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**possible further activities**

**Students’ requests**  Tell students that you will do anything for them if they ask you politely enough. They should ask you to do things, using the various expressions on page 43. (‘I was wondering if you could lend me some money.’ ‘Could I ask you to clean my shoes?’) Useful answers on your part: ‘Certainly – later’; ‘Of course – as soon as I have some free time.’