

Narrative Tenses Summary

When a story is told, whether it's by word of mouth, or in a book or a film, the narrative is very rarely given simply as a set of events in chronological order. As well as the actions and dialogue of the characters, we also have descriptions of the *setting*, *background* information, *flashbacks* or *recollections*. To do this in the English language there are what we call the past tense **narrative tenses** which define the main actions from the background information and can move us back and forward in time.

Uses of the Narrative Tenses

Here are the main functions (for more information on forms and uses see the Narrative Tenses Chart) of the three main Narrative Forms:

- 🕒 **Past Simple** – for completed actions in the past, if used repeatedly the actions are chronological e.g.
*He **got up**, **opened** the curtains and **looked** outside.*
- 🕒 **Past Continuous** – for ongoing actions in the past, used to give a setting or background information e.g.
*It **was pouring** with rain and people **were rushing** home from work.*

The *Past Continuous* is also commonly used with together the *Past Simple* to indicate a longer ongoing action (Past Continuous) which is interrupted by a completed or shorter action (Past Simple) e.g.

*As she **was driving** along the road a man suddenly ran out in front of the car.*

In this example the “driving” is the ongoing, longer action which is interrupted by the man who “ran out”

- 🕒 **Past Perfect (simple & continuous)** – for an action which happened before another action in the past.
*He searched in his bag, but soon realised that he **had forgotten** his sandwiches.*

In this example the sandwiches were “forgotten” before he “searched” in his bag.

How the narrative forms work together

Here's a text only using the **Past Simple**:

Mike **sat** on the bench. He **saw** someone in the distance. It **was** his father. They **stared** at each other for a moment and then they **embraced**.

- How does this sound to you? Would you want to continue reading the story?

Now we'll add in the **Past Continuous**.

Mike **sat** on the bench, the sun **was shining** and birds **were singing** in the trees nearby. He **saw** someone in the distance. As the person **was getting closer** he **saw** that he **was wearing** a familiar brown leather jacket and a Fedora hat. It **was** his father. They **stared** at each other for a moment and then they **embraced**, tears of joy **were running** down their faces.

- What sort of information is being added by the *Past Continuous* in green? How does it help the story?

Finally we'll put in the **Past Perfect**.

Mike **sat** on the bench, the sun **was shining** and birds **were singing** in the trees nearby. After he **had been sitting** there for ten minutes, he **saw** someone in the distance. As the person **was getting closer** he **saw** that he **was wearing** a familiar oversized leather jacket and a Fedora hat. It **was** his father, who he **hadn't seen** since he 14 years old. They **stared** at each other for a moment and then they **embraced**, tears of joy **were running** down their faces.

- What sort of information is being added by the *Past Perfect* in brown? How does it help the story?