

General

There are lots of past tenses in English. The difference between them is in the idea of time. Below are two tenses that are easy to confuse;

Past simple

This is the most common past tense. You can use it in two ways;

Particular past

Use it when the exact time of the event is important/given¹.

Finished past

Use it when the period of time of the event is finished².

This is an ideal tense for talking about actions and sequences.

Present perfect

This is the sometimes almost a present tense. It is good for giving results. You can use it in two ways;

General past

Use it when the exact time of the event is not important or given³.

Unfinished past

Use it when the period of time of the event is not finished⁴.

This is an ideal tense for talking about experiences and results.

Time words

You can use time words to help you decide which tense to use. They are often (not always!) used with one or the other of these tenses.

Compare sentences

Look at some examples of similar sentences. These should help you see this different idea of time.

Focus

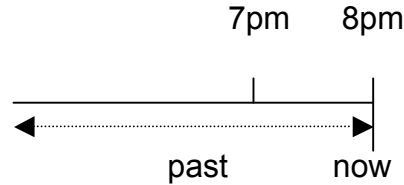
If you don't use a particular time word, you can often use either tense. It depends what you want to focus on next;

- the past simple focuses on events in the past⁵
- the present perfect focuses on events in the present and future⁶.

PAST SIMPLE

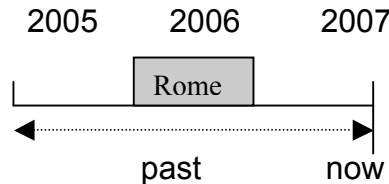
Particular past

He read the report an hour ago¹.



Finished past

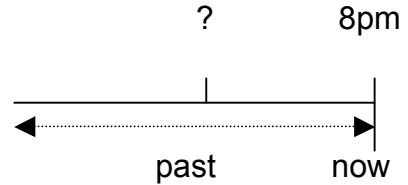
He worked in Rome for a year².
(now he doesn't.)



PRESENT PERFECT

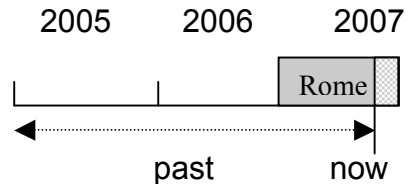
General past

He has already³ read the report.



Unfinished past

He has worked in Rome for a year⁴.
(he still works there.)



Time words

last week/last year
yesterday/ago/when
at [2pm]/in [2003/June]

this week/this year
recently/ever/still/just/already/yet
since [2pm]/since [2003/June]

Compare sentences

He moved jobs many times when he was young^{1/2}.

He has moved jobs many times in his life⁴.

I was sick so I did not go to work yesterday^{1/2}.

I am sick so I have not been to work recently³.

When^{1/2} did you go to America?

Have you ever^{3/4} been to America?

Focus

The business failed...
...Then he lost the house and had to start over. It took a long time⁵.

The business has failed...
...So he will probably lose the house and have to start over. It could take a long time⁶.