

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 use it for a particular/finished past, but when events happened in the **same time period**¹ ie one after the other.

This is an ideal tense for talking about **actions and sequences**^{1a}.

Past perfect

This is a much less common past tense. You also use it for a particular/finished past, but when one event happened in a different, **earlier time period**² ie one before the other.

This is an ideal tense for talking about **reasons and explanations**^{2a} for past events (this means you can only use it along with another past tense, not on its own)

Compare sentences

Look at some examples of similar sentences. These should help you see this different idea of time. Note how the past perfect is always used with another past tense. In the last example, the two sentences mean the same – the past perfect replaces the idea of 'before' in the first example.

Focus

The simple past focuses on going forward through the past, what happened next (first, this happened, second this happened, then this happened etc.)

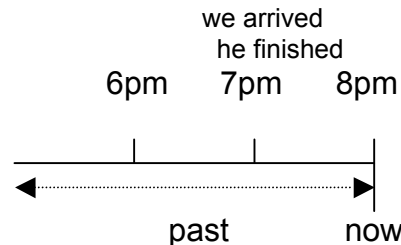
The past perfect focuses on going backwards through the past, what happened before (this happened, because first and second, this had happened etc.)

PAST SIMPLE

Particular/finished past...

..in the same time period

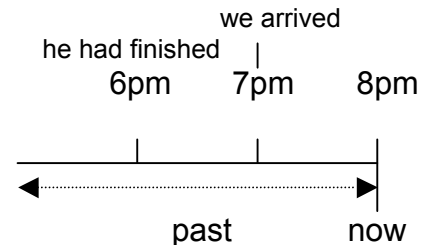
When **we arrived**, **he finished**¹ the report.



PAST PERFECT

..in a different, earlier time period

When we arrived, **he had finished**² the report.



Compare sentences

He moved jobs several times when he was young.

He had moved jobs several times by the time I met him.

I was sick so I did not go to work yesterday.

I was sick because I had eaten something bad.

When did you go to America?

When did you go to America, and had you been there before?

He typed the letter before they = arrived.

He had typed the letter when they arrived.

Focus

The business failed...
...Then he lost the house and had to start over. It took a long time^{1a}.



The business failed...
...The market had dropped and sales had never recovered^{2a}.

