

Unit 3

TENSE & FINITENESS

I. VERB FORMS

If you look at a typical piece of writing by an average student, you are bound to notice a lot of errors which have to do with the forms of **verbs**. Why is it so difficult to learn to use verbs correctly in English?

Let's start by looking at Chinese. Take any verb – say, the verb *chi* (吃 'eat').

QUESTION 1:

How many different forms does the Chinese verb *chi* (吃) have?

ANSWER:

In Chinese, a verb has only one form. *Chi* is always *chi* -- no matter who, no matter when, no matter how.

Now take the English verb *eat*.

QUESTION 2:

Can you list all the different forms of the verb *eat*?

ANSWER:

You should have at least five: *eat, eats, eating, ate, eaten*. You might have an additional form, the infinitive *to eat* (we'll explain in the Notes for Students why this may be

necessary). Just to make it easier for us to refer to them from now on, let's give each of them a label. We'll use the verbs *eat* and *talk* for illustration:

<u>VERB FORM</u>	<u>LABEL</u>
i) <i>eat, talk</i>	present tense (general)
ii) <i>eats, talks</i>	present tense (3 rd person singular)
iii) <i>ate, talked</i>	past tense
iv) <i>eating, talking</i>	present participle
v) <i>eaten, talked</i>	past participle
vi) <i>(to) eat, (to) talk</i>	infinitive

QUESTION 3:

Give the six forms of the following verbs:

	<i>wash</i>	<i>break</i>	<i>run</i>	<i>hear</i>
Present tense (general)	_____	_____	_____	_____
Present tense (3 rd per. sing.)	_____	_____	_____	_____
Past tense	_____	_____	_____	_____
Present participle	_____	_____	_____	_____
Past participle	_____	_____	_____	_____
Infinitive	_____	_____	_____	_____

Most verbs in English are like *talk* and *wash*, in having '**regular**' past tense and past participle forms, which are formed by attaching the suffix *-ed* to the verb, as in *talk*, *talked* (past tense), *talked* (past participle).

1. They talk too much.
2. They talked too much yesterday.
3. They have talked too much already.

[NB. For an explanation why we treat *talked* in (3) as past participle rather than past tense, see the Notes for Students for this unit]. In contrast, a certain number of verbs – especially among the more 'basic' verbs like *eat*, *see*, *run*, etc. – are '**irregular**', because they form the past tense and past participle in other ways than by adding *-ed*, as in *eat*, *ate*, *eaten*; *see*, *saw*, *seen*; *run*, *ran*, *run*, etc.

4. They eat too much.
5. They ate too much yesterday.
6. They have eaten too much already.

For such verbs, you'll just have to memorise their irregular forms.

II. TENSE

Merely knowing the **forms** of verbs is a relatively trivial matter – if in doubt, just look it up in a dictionary. What is less easy and much more important is to learn to use these different forms of verbs properly in their various **functions**.

One of the most important functions of verb forms is to show **tense**. Tense is one of the most noticeable differences between English and Chinese grammar. As you know, Chinese has no tense. For example, the verb ‘住’ (live) in sentence (7) is neither in the present nor the past tense:

7. 他住在大埔 (‘he live in Taipo’)

This does not, of course, mean that Chinese has no way of indicating time. In Chinese, you can indicate the time frame by using such phrases as ‘now’ (現在), ‘before’ (以前), ‘after’ (以後), ‘already’ (已經), ‘yesterday’ (昨天), etc. and other devices like **aspect**, which we'll not go into here), as in:

8. ‘He now live in Taipo’ (他現在住在大埔)
9. ‘He before live in Taipo’ (他以前住在大埔)

The big difference between English and Chinese is this:

In English, a time frame – ‘past’ or ‘present’ – is **built into** the grammar of verbs, rather than just added on as extra words.

English grammar forces us to commit the main verb of a sentence to either the **present** or **past tense**. The English equivalents of (8-9) are thus:

10. He lives in Taipo.
11. He lived in Taipo.

(If we like, we can add ‘now’ or ‘in the past’ to these sentences for extra emphasis, but they are not necessary in English, as they are in Chinese, to distinguish present and past.)

Which of the six forms of a verb are used to indicate tense? Three of them, namely:

Present tense (general) : *eat, talk*

Present tense (3 rd per. sing.)	:	<i>eats, talks</i>
Past tense	:	<i>ate, talked</i>

The above three forms are thus called **tensed** or '**finite**' forms. 'Finite' suggests 'limited'. Take any verb from a dictionary – e.g. the verb *eat*, which means 'to consume food'. In the 'infinitive' form, not marked for tense, the verb only stands for a type of action, rather than any individual occurrence of that action.

Do you recall the discussion on nouns in Unit 2? A noun on its own, like 'book', stands only for a type of object, and does not refer to any individual book in the world. But if we mark it with a **determiner** like *the, this, my* etc., then it refers not just to any book, but to a particular book.

Thus, there's something in common in the grammar of nouns and verbs in English. In order for a verb to refer to an actual occurrence of an action, or a noun to refer to an actual object, it has to be 'limited' in some way, to a particular time (present or past), or a particular entity (this or that object). This is basically what '**finite**' means.

Thus, a verb which is marked for tense is said to be 'finite' because the tense limits the reference of the verb to some time frame, present or past. For example:

10. He lives in Taipo.
(*lives* = limited to occurrence in the **present** time frame, and with a **singular** subject.)
11. He lived in Taipo.
(*lived* = limited to occurrence in the **past** time frame.)

Compare and contrast these with the **non-finite** (i.e. without tense) forms, e.g. *to live, living*:

12. Living in Taipo can be hazardous to your health.
13. To live in Suzhou is heaven.

Unlike the finite forms *lives* and *lived*, the non-finite forms *living* and *to live* do not refer to any actual occurrence of the act of 'living', and can refer to any time and anybody.

The first important point to remember about the use of tenses in English is this:

The main verb of a sentence must be finite (i.e. marked for tense)

Here are some exercises to give you more practice in the use of finite verb forms.

QUESTION 4:

The underlined verbs in the following sentences are finite (i.e. marked for tense). Explain in what sense each verb is 'finite' – i.e. limited to what time frame and (if possible) what kind of subject?

1. He lived in Hong Kong when he was a child. Now he lives in Singapore.
2. In 1950, a domestic maid earned about \$50 a month; now she earns \$3,600.
3. When he arrived home last night, he found the door broken, so he called the police.
4. Whenever he has time, he swims and jogs to stay in shape.
5. Though the last plane has left, many people are still waiting for a flight out.
6. He did not report for work yesterday as he was not feeling well.

ANSWER:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

QUESTION 5:

A number of verbs with all their different forms are given below. In each of the following sentences, fill in the blank with the correct form of any of the verbs given. (NB. In some cases more than one answer is possible.)

VERBS:

eat, eats, eating, ate, eaten, to eat
see, sees, seeing, saw, seen, to see
live, lives, living, lived, to live
write, writes, writing, wrote, written, to write
break, breaks, breaking, broke, broken, to break
hear, hears, hearing, heard, to hear

1. He _____ the new James Bond movie last week.
 2. She _____ letters to her parents very often.
 3. He _____ the door with his hands.
 4. Tom _____ the news on the radio.
 5. He _____ nothing but boiled vegetables.
 6. He _____ in Repulse Bay, but his wife _____ in Ma On Shan.
-
-

You will find that *only* **finite** forms of verbs can occur in the blanks in the above sentences. All these slots are for the main verb of the sentence.

QUESTION 6:

The following sentences are taken from students' writings. Correct the errors in the **tense** of the verbs.

1. Half of the respondents being neutral with that question.

2. Millions of years ago, some of the lands become seas, and some becomes rivers.

3. The vegetation was covered by a layer of mud which consist of sand and small rocks.

4. I went to the park and watch the kids play football.

III. VERB GROUPS

Quite often, verbs in English occur in groups rather than singly. Each group consists of a **main verb**, which is always at the end of the group, preceded by one or more **auxiliary verbs** ('helping verbs'), as in 'He could have been crying'. Look at the sentences below (14-24). Each of them contains a verb group (underlined for you). (Notice that, as in 23-24, the verb group need not be continuous, but can be 'split up' by other words.)

14. He is washing his dog.
15. He was washing his dog at that time.
16. He has taken his dog for a walk.
17. He had taken his dog for a walk when I called.
18. He can jump over this fence easily.
19. He could jump over this fence when he was slimmer.
20. He should have taken his job more seriously.
21. He has been arrested many times.
22. He had been waiting for two hours when she finally arrived.
23. He did not say that he was unhappy.
24. Did he say that he was unhappy?

QUESTION 7:

Look at sentences 14-24 above. Are all the verbs in each verb group marked individually for tense? If not, circle the verb which is marked for tense (present or past). Can you make a simple generalisation about which verb in a verb group is marked for tense in all cases?

ANSWER:

I think the answer should not be difficult to find:

In a finite verb group, only the first verb is marked for tense

So remember this: If the main verb occurs alone (without any auxiliary verbs), it is marked for tense (e.g. 'He stopped'). But if we have a verb group instead of a single verb, then it is the very *first* verb in the group which is marked for tense, and not the main verb or any other verb in the group. In the following examples, the verb groups are enclosed in brackets. Notice that it is always the first verb in the group which is marked for tense, and all the other verbs are in either the bare form or some present or past participle form:

- He [could not stop] in time.
- He [would stop] if you asked him.
- He [was sleeping] in the middle of my lecture.
- He [has been sleeping] a lot in class lately.

QUESTION 8:

Some (but not all) of the verbs in the following sentences are in the wrong form. Identify and correct these errors:

1. Would Kevin stopped seeing his friends?
2. She can't tolerated such an unreliable relationship.
3. More than 50% did not agreed with that.
4. She can't be bothered with all these details.
5. He did not wash the dishes last night.
6. He always playing in the field.
7. The window broken by someone yesterday.
8. When I phoned him last night, he having a shower.

ANSWER:

QUESTION 9:

Fill in the blank in each of the following sentences with the correct form of the verb in brackets. Remember, if the verb belongs to a verb group, then only the first verb in the group can be marked for tense.

1. Though I asked him many times, he would not _____(tell) me the answer.
2. When the bill came, he suddenly realised that he did not _____(have) enough money.
3. Do you think he should _____(apologise) for what he said?
4. How could he possibly _____(know) what we were planning?
5. I did not deliberately _____(step) on your toes.
6. Whenever it rains, the temperature always _____(drop).
7. When the enemy advanced, they _____(retreat), and when the enemy retreated, they _____(advance).
8. His wife told him to _____(buy) a water-melon, but he _____(buy) a durian instead.
9. Though he is very rich, he never _____(show) it.
10. Though he was poor, he _____(pretend) to be rich.

IV. PRESENT TENSE

To recapitulate, the main verb of a sentence in English must be **finite**, i.e. marked for **tense**. There are three tensed forms:

Present tense (general):	<i>sing, dance</i>	‘They sing and dance for a living’
Present tense (3 rd per. sing.)	<i>sings, dances</i>	‘He sings and dances for a living’
Past tense	<i>sang, danced</i>	‘He sang and danced for a living’

We will discuss the non-finite forms – e.g. *singing, sung, (to) sing* -- in later units (4 and 9), on ‘auxiliaries’ and ‘non-finite clauses’ respectively.

Here, we’ll go into the use of the tenses in English. The names ‘**present**’ **tense** and ‘**past**’ **tense** do have an obvious meaning – generally, verbs in the present tense do refer to present occurrences or states, and verbs in the past tense to past occurrences or states. But these are just generalisations, and verbs in the present tense especially have a much wider range of uses beyond just referring to present time. We’ll try to work them out in the following exercises.

QUESTION 10:

The verbs in the following sentences are in the present tense (‘simple present tense’). What time frame do they actually refer to -- e.g. to the present moment (i.e. the moment of speaking), or what? [Hint: It may be helpful to take 1-4 separately from 5-8.]

1. He plays tennis every day.
2. He plays tennis only once a year.
3. The boy usually delivers the paper early, but this morning he’s late.
4. The boy seldom delivers the paper on time.
5. She lives here, but right now she is visiting her parents in Beijing.
6. I know six different languages.
7. Shark fin costs more than crab meat.
8. He owns half the buildings in this town.

ANSWER:

QUESTION 11:

In Question 10, you’ve seen how the present tense can be used to refer to certain time frames which do not necessarily coincide with the present moment. In the following

sentences, the present tense is used to indicate yet another time frame. Can you describe what it is?

1. The earth revolves round the sun, and the moon revolves round the earth.
2. Pure water boils at 100 degrees Celsius at sea level.
3. Gold weighs more than silver.
4. Cows eat grass, but monkeys prefer bananas.

ANSWER:

QUESTION 12:

Here are some more sentences where the verbs are in the present tense. What time frame do they actually refer to, and is it different from questions 10-11?

1. The plane leaves early tomorrow morning.
2. The first semester ends on December 18.
3. The first one to move, dies.
4. The fasting month begins next week.

ANSWER:

In Questions 10-12, we looked at some uses of the ‘simple’ Present Tense which do not really refer to occurrences at precisely the present moment (i.e. the moment of speaking). We begin to wonder, does the so-called simple Present Tense ever refer to something happening right at the present moment? How about the sentences in Question 13?

QUESTION 13:

What time frame do you think we’re looking at in the following sentences?

1. I resign!
2. I hereby sentence you to life imprisonment.
3. I declare this meeting open.
4. [TV Commentator:] Ronaldo passes the ball to Ronaldino, but Alberto intercepts and passes it to Albertino.

ANSWER:

The above use of the simple Present Tense is rather limited. In the next unit, we'll see how the Present Tense can be combined with the Progressive Aspect to refer in general to events actually occurring at the present moment.

V. PAST TENSE

While the present tense has a broad range of uses (as you'll have noticed from the above exercises), the **past tense** does actually refer to past time in the great majority of cases. So we need not do any exercises on this. Most mistakes are due to students' neglecting to use the past tense, rather than to any misunderstanding. So, just be more careful!

There are, however, a few 'specialised' uses of the past tense which do not really have anything to do with past time. The most important of these has to do with **conditional** ('if...then') sentences. There are three main types of conditionals, some involving and some not involving the past tense:

- (i) If it rains, we will cancel the game. [present tense]
- (ii) If it rained, we would cancel the game. [past tense]
- (iii) If it had rained, we would have cancelled the game. [past perfect]

From these examples alone, without a context, it would be hard to guess what the differences are. The following exercise will help.

QUESTION 14:

Analyse the following examples, where the verbs in the conditional sentences are underlined. You will find examples of all the three forms given in (i-iii) above. Do not think of any differences in time (there are none). Rather, try to relate the three different verb forms to this question: how likely and how real is the situation we're talking about in this sentence?

1. I haven't heard from him yet. If I hear anything, I will let you know immediately.
2. I honestly don't know the answer. If I knew, I would tell you right now.
3. He didn't know at that time that she was a divorcee. If he had known, he would not have proposed to her.
4. I'll have to check my bank balance. If I have enough money, I will join the tour.
5. If I had a million dollars, I would donate it to my university. But I don't think I'll ever have that much money.
6. I regret that I did not donate my winnings to charity. If I had done that, I would have avoided having to pay so much tax.

7. If you call after 9 tonight, I will be home. I'm not so sure about tomorrow night though.
8. No, he did not call last night. If he had called, I would have given him a scolding.
9. No, I don't think he's going to call. But even if he called, I would not answer the phone anyway.

The differences between the three forms, in terms of likelihood or reality, are:

PRESENT TENSE:

PAST TENSE:

PAST PERFECT:

QUESTION 15:

In items 1-3 below, all three forms of the conditional (present tense, past tense, past perfect) are given and underlined. Circle the form which you think is the most appropriate in this particular situation. In 4-6, fill in the blank with the most suitable form of the verb in brackets.

1. Luckily it stopped raining two days ago. If the rain does not stop/did not stop/had not stopped, the town will be flooded/would be flooded/would have been flooded.
2. I'm going to the bookstore this afternoon. If I find/found/had found the book, I will get/would get/would have got it for you.
3. If I am/were/had been your father, I will spank/would spank/would have spanked you, but I'm only your teacher.
4. The police are out looking for the terrorist. If they _____ (find) him, they _____(shoot) him on sight.

5. The police surrounded the terrorists' hideout but failed to catch anyone. If they _____ (catch) some of the terrorists, the police chief _____(be) very proud of them.
6. Unfortunately, he doesn't exercise or play any sports. If he _____ (do), he _____(not be) as fat as he is now.

+++++

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

Though the concept of tense is not found in Chinese, it is not really that difficult a concept to understand. What is more difficult is to remember to use it, for English requires the main verb of a sentence to be finite (or tensed). Here are a few more exercises on tense for you.

Exercise 1:

Underline all the verbs in the following text, and identify each of them as either **finite** or **non-finite**. [Treat a whole verb group as one verb.] If the verb is finite, say whether it is in the present or past tense.

There is something about lying on your back in a hospital bed with half a dozen needles poking out of your skin that makes you really ponder your health, and how to maintain it. The sound of the old man in the next bed snoring loudly is testament to just how relaxing acupuncture really can be. But being the youngest patient in the clinic by at least two generations did make me wonder whether acupuncture and its associated traditional therapies are strictly for the old.

Exercise 2:

In each of the following texts, fill in the blanks with the appropriate forms of the verbs in brackets:

Text 1:

A passenger _____ (tell) yesterday of frightening scenes aboard the holiday cruise ship SuperStar Leo when it _____(run) into severe tropical storm Hagupit on Wednesday, forcing it to _____(change) course and _____(return) to Hong Kong a day late.

Passengers _____ (be) slammed against walls, tables _____ (overturn) and luggage _____ (fall) from overhead lockers, the passenger said.

The vessel's operator, Star Cruises, _____ (confirm) the day-long delay _____ (be) caused by the closure of Hong Kong harbour, which _____ (force) Leo to _____ (seek) shelter near Dangan Island, about 30km south of Tsing Yi in mainland waters. However, the company _____ (deny) that anyone _____ (have) been injured.

The passenger said weather conditions _____ (deteriorate) quickly after 1pm on Wednesday and the ship _____ (be) rocked heavily until after 5pm. Leo _____ (be) scheduled to return to Ocean Terminal at 4pm on Wednesday but eventually _____ (return) to Hong Kong at 10am on Thursday.

Text 2:

Father Franco Mella _____ (put) even more weight behind the right-of-abode seekers after his return from a four-month visit home to Italy - where he _____ (pile) on 10kg.

The 53-year-old, who _____ (begin) a hunger strike next Monday to promote the right-of-abode cause, _____ (say) the home-made pasta, pizza and salami served up by his 79-year-old mother _____ (be) behind his expanded waistline.

The priest, who now _____ (weigh) about 95kg, _____ (point) out that he _____ (lose) about 10kg when he _____ (stage) a 10-day hunger strike with the abode seekers last April before returning to his home in Italy.

"When my mother first _____ (see) me, she _____ (ask) me never to fast again. But when she later _____ (see) me becoming fatter and fatter, she _____ (say): 'You better go back to Hong Kong'," Father Mella said.

