

# Past Perfect Tense: How to Use It

The **past perfect**, also called the pluperfect, is a **verb tense** used to talk about something that happened before something else that is also in the past.

Imagine waking up one morning and stepping outside to grab the newspaper. On your way back in, you notice a mysterious message scrawled across your front door: “Tootles was here.” When you’re telling this story to your friends later, how will you describe this moment? You might say something like:

*I turned back to the house and saw that someone named Tootles **had defaced** my front door!*

In addition to feeling indignant on your behalf, your friends will also be able to understand that Tootles graffitied the door at some point in the past *before* the moment this morning when you saw their handiwork, because you used the **past perfect** tense to describe the misdeed.

## The past perfect formula

The formula for the past perfect tense is **had + [past participle]**. It doesn’t matter if the subject is singular or plural; the formula doesn’t change.

## When to use the past perfect

So what’s the difference between the past perfect and the **simple past**? When you’re talking about some point in the past and want to reference an event

that happened even earlier, using the past perfect allows you to convey the sequence of the events. It's also clearer and more specific. Consider the difference between these two sentences:

*We were relieved that Tootles **used** washable paint.*

*We were relieved that Tootles **had used** washable paint.*

It's a subtle difference, but the first sentence doesn't tie Tootles's act of using washable paint to any particular moment in time; listeners might interpret it as "We were relieved that Tootles was in the habit of using washable paint." In the second sentence, the past perfect makes it clear that you're talking about a specific instance of using washable paint.

Another time to use the past perfect is when you are expressing a condition and a result:

*If I **had woken up** earlier this morning, I would have caught Tootles red-handed.*

The past perfect is used in the part of the sentence that explains the **condition** (the if-clause).

Most often when writing, the reason to use a verb in the past perfect tense is to show that the action it describes happened before other actions, in the same sentence or preceding ones, that are described by verbs in the simple past tense. Writing an entire paragraph with every verb in the past perfect tense is generally unnecessary, because once you have established the earlier time, you can continue to describe that earlier time in the simple past and readers will understand when the action is happening.

*When I was out there this morning cleaning off the door, I remembered that just last week I **had noticed** what a muddy white color it is, and I **had thought** about other colors for it. I even **went** inside then and **looked** at paint colors online.*

In the first sentence, you clearly establish the time before this morning that you were recalling this morning with the use of the past perfect in *had noticed* and *had thought*. Then, in the second sentence, you can switch back to the simple past and be understood as still referring to that earlier time last week.

## When not to use the past perfect

Don't use the past perfect when you're not trying to convey some sequence of past events. If your friends asked what else you did this morning besides discovering the graffiti, they would be confused if you said:

*I **had cleaned** it off the door.*

They'd likely be waiting for you to go on to describe what happened next because using the past perfect implies that your action of cleaning the door occurred *before* something else happened. The "something else" doesn't always have to be explicitly mentioned, but context needs to make it clear. In this case there's no context, so the past perfect doesn't make sense.

## How to make the past perfect negative

Making the past perfect negative is simple! The formula is **had + not + [past participle]**.

We looked for witnesses, but the neighbors **had not seen** Tootles in the act.

If Tootles **had not included** their own name in the message, we would have no idea who was behind it.

## How to ask a question in the past perfect

The formula for asking a question in the past perfect tense is **had + [subject] + [past participle]**.

**Had** Tootles **caused** trouble in other neighborhoods before they struck ours?

## Common regular verbs in the past perfect tense

<b>Infinitive</b>	<b>Past Perfect</b>	<b>Negative</b>
to ask	had asked	had not asked
to work	had worked	had not worked
to call	had called	had not called
to use	had used	had not used

## Common **irregular verbs** in the past perfect tense

<b>Infinitive</b>	<b>Past Perfect</b>	<b>Negative</b>
to be	had been	had not been

to have	had had	had not been
to do	had done	had not done
to say	had said	had not said
to get	had gotten*	had not gotten*
to make	had made	had not made
to go	had gone	had not gone
to take	had taken	had not taken
to see	had seen	had not seen
to come	had come	had not come

\*The past participle of “to get” is “gotten” in American English. In British English, the past participle is “got.”