

Mistakes with verbs and tenses

WORD ORDER IN SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

Word order in subordinate clauses, i.e. parts of sentences beginning with “the place where ...”, “the time when ...”, “the man who ...”, etc., is not the same as in questions. Word order in subordinate clauses is **exactly the same** as in ordinary indicative (non-question) sentences, e.g.

- I don't know why he goes there. (correct)*
- I don't know why does he go there. (wrong)*

- She didn't tell me where she hid it. (correct)*
- She didn't tell me where did she hide it. (wrong)*

- We all know why Peter has never gone there. (correct)*
- We all know why has Peter never gone there. (wrong)*

The same word order is preserved even if the whole sentence (but not the clause) is a question:

- Do you know why she did it? (correct)*
- Do you know why did she do it? (wrong)*

- Do you know why he is acting so strange? (correct)*
- Do you know why is he acting so strange? (wrong)*

“But isn’t word order different in questions?”, you are perhaps asking. It is, but the question is “Do you know ...?”. The “why she did it” part is a subordinate clause.

People tend to make mistakes especially after “who” and “what” in connection with “be”:

- Do you know *who he is?* (correct)
- Do you know *who is he?* (wrong)
- Do you know *what it is?* (correct)
- Do you know *what is it?* (wrong)

The structure is slightly different when “who” or “what” is the subject of the sentence, but the word order is still the same:

- Do you know *who did it?* (correct)
- Do you know *who did do it?* (wrong)

PRESENT PERFECT WITH SPECIFIC TIME

The present perfect expresses the idea of “an action that was finished at some unspecified point in the past”. Saying “I have done it yesterday” is basically the same as saying “I finished doing it yesterday at some unspecified point in the past”. It doesn’t really work, does it; it’s either “at some point” or “yesterday”, not both. If you want to include the time when the action took place, you must use the simple past tense (the “-ed” form), e.g.

- I *did it yesterday.* (correct)
- I *have done it yesterday.* (wrong)
- I *visited my grandmother last weekend.* (correct)
- I *have visited my grandmother last weekend.* (wrong)

However, the simple past is ambiguous. “I did it yesterday” can be used to express that you finished it yesterday as well as that you left the work unfinished and will continue doing it later, e.g. “I did it yesterday, and I am also going to do it tomorrow”. If you want to express that the action is already completed, you can use verbs like “finish” or “complete” in the simple past:

I finished my homework yesterday. (correct)

I have finished my homework yesterday. (wrong)

A strong indicator that you shouldn’t use the present perfect is the presence of “when” in the sentence, since “when” always refers to a specific point in time:

When did you write the book? (correct)

When did you finish writing the book? (correct)

When have you written the book? (wrong)

I don’t know when she did her homework. (correct)

I don’t know when she finished her homework. (correct)

I don’t know when she has done her homework. (wrong)

Note that there is one case when “when + present perfect” can be used: to express surprise or mistrust. Say, a friend of yours told you how he enjoyed the view from the Eiffel Tower, and you weren’t aware of the fact that he had ever been to Paris. You could ask

When have you been to Paris?

It is an expression of surprise. You aren’t really asking when he visited Paris; you express that the fact he did surprised you.

There is another common situation in which the rule can be (seemingly) broken. For example, it is perfectly fine to say:

How many films have you seen this week?

The reason is that “this week” is not a point in the past (even though it *includes* days which are in the past); it is a point (a period) in the present. The present perfect in such a situation implies “so far”: “How many films have you seen *so far (up until now)* this week?”

The present perfect can be used with any period which includes the present with the implied meaning of “so far”. This includes the common adverbs students learn to use with the present perfect, e.g. “ever” (“from the beginning of the universe until now”), “never” (“not ever”), “already”/“yet” (“from some implied point in the past until now”), for example:

Have you done it yet?
I have never been there.

AREN'T I, AMN'T I

When you ask affirmative questions (the so called *question tags*) at the end of a sentence, you are supposed to use a contracted version of “be”, “have”, “do”, etc., for example:

He is from England, isn't he?
You have done your homework already, haven't you?
You went on a holiday last week, didn't you?

There is no problem with contracted forms of all the verbs, with one exception. What if you were to say: “I am new here, ...n't I?” What would the ellipsis (the three dots) stand for?

Unless you were in Scotland, people would find it funny if you said “amn't I” (“amn't” is a word that simply doesn't exist in any standard form of English). This (seemingly) leaves us with only one option—not contracting the verb at all:

||||| *I am new here, am I not?*

However, this puts strong, authoritative emphasis on the preceding statement and sounds very formal. For example, a teacher arguing with a disrespectful pupil could say

||||| *I believe I am your teacher, am I not?*

Because of this authoritative connotation, another way of saying “am I not” developed: virtually all native speakers use the form “aren’t I”, which is now completely acceptable in any spoken or informal written context. To sum it up:

- ||||| *I am new here, aren’t I? (correct in any informal context)*
- ||||| *I am new here, am I not? (correct, but only in a fairly formal context)*
- ||||| *I am new here, amn’t I? (incorrect; used only in a handful of dialects)*

USE TO DO

English learners learn quite early to use the phrase “someone used to do something”. It expresses that someone did something regularly long time ago but doesn’t do it anymore in the present. For example:

||||| *I used to play the violin.*

which means

||||| *I played the violin when I was younger, but I don't do that anymore.*

Learners often incorrectly infer that this is just the past tense of “I use to do”, which should, logically, mean “I regularly do”. However, **no such phrase exists** in standard English. Native speakers never say “I use to do something”, however logical it may sound:



- I used to play the violin. (correct, past)*
- I regularly play the violin. (correct, present)*
- I use to play the violin. (wrong)*

Note, however, that native speakers quite often write “use to” as a misspelling of “used to”, because “-d t-” is usually pronounced just as “t”. When you see a native speaker write “I use to do”, they mean, in fact, “I used to do”.

HAVEN’T/DON’T HAVE

The verb “have” is slightly confusing because it has a negative form of its own. In standard modern English usage, the form “haven’t” is used only as an auxiliary verb, e.g.



- I haven’t done it yet.*

It is rarely used when there is a direct object, and such usage is considered colloquial:



- She doesn’t have a car. (correct)*
- She hasn’t a car. (colloquial)*

Such usage is slowly dying out, so it is advisable for a learner to avoid it altogether. If you want to use the word “haven’t”, there’s a perfectly fine way to do that; simply add “got”:



- She hasn’t got a car. (correct)*

There are a few idioms in which “haven’t” used as an ordinary verb has survived, however. The expression “I haven’t a clue” was in fact even more common than “I don’t have a clue” in American English until about 1990s, and it is still more popular in British English:

I haven't a clue. (correct)

I have no clue. (correct)

I don't have a clue. (correct)

Similarly, “haven’t” is often used in connection with “idea”, e.g.

I haven't the foggiest idea. (correct)

I haven't the faintest idea. (correct)

The former can be abbreviated to (with the same meaning):

I haven't the foggiest.

LEND OR BORROW

The verbs “lend” and “borrow” are among the most commonly confused words in the English language. Why? Because they are often translated by just a single verb into other languages. To put it completely bluntly:

to lend = to give something to somebody,

to borrow = to receive something from somebody,

provided the thing in question is expected to be returned to its original owner later. A simple way to decide whether to use “lend” or “borrow” is to see whether the sentence would make sense if we used “give” or “receive” instead. For example:

I lent him my new bicycle. (correct)

I borrowed him my new bicycle. (wrong)

Since you *give*, you *lend*, not borrow. Similarly:

Would you please lend me your bicycle? (correct)

Would you please borrow me your bicycle? (wrong)

“Would you please receive me your bicycle?” doesn’t make any sense, whereas “Would you please give me your bicycle?” is perfectly fine. An example in the opposite direction:

I went to the bank to borrow some money. (correct)

I went to the bank to lend some money. (wrong)

Again, “I went to the bank to receive some money” is a perfectly fine sentence. The other sentence is probably wrong, unless you are Bill Gates and the bank wants to borrow money *from* you.

To loan or not to loan

The word loan is a noun describing either the act of lending something or, in the case of money, the money itself, e.g.

I got a loan from the bank.

In American English, “loan” can be used also as a verb synonymous to “lend” (mostly in connection with money):

A friend of mine loaned me a lot of money. (American English)

However, you will probably get a few strange looks if you try to use “loan” as a verb synonymous to “lend” in Europe, so it is better to avoid it when addressing an international audience.

BORING OR BORED

My mother once asked me how to use words like “bored” and “boring”, “annoyed” and “annoying”, etc. Oddly enough, her teacher told

her a rule (which was *wrong*) that “-ed” words were used with people and “-ing” words were used with things.

The logic is as follows: Adjectives containing -ing or -ed are usually derived from verbs. If you say that someone is “-ing”, it means *he himself* does the action described by the verb. If he is “-ed”, someone or something does or did the action *to him*.

The verb “to annoy” means (roughly) “to make somebody angry”. So, if someone is “annoying”, *he or she* makes other people angry; if someone is “annoyed”, other people or things made *him or her* angry. Similarly, the verb “bore” means “to make tired” (in a certain way), so if you say “I am boring”, it means *you make* other people tired; if you say “I am bored”, something *makes you* tired.

It works this way for any verb. The reason why my mother was told the rule was probably that for a lot of verbs (such as “to bore”), saying that a thing is “-ed” doesn’t really make sense (it’s hard to make a stone bored, for example). Nevertheless, it does make sense for many verbs (a stone can be breaking something as well as broken), and the logic is always the same.

MAKE SOMEONE (TO) DO SOMETHING

When you convince or force someone to do something, you can say that you “made him or her do it”, without “to”:

- His mother made him clean his room. (correct)
- His mother made him to clean his room. (wrong?)

The latter example is not grammatically wrong, but it would mean that “his mother created him (i.e. gave birth to him) in order to clean his room,” which is probably not a thing we would normally want to say.

LEARN SOMEONE TO DO SOMETHING

In English, when you improve your own knowledge, you *learn*, but when you increase someone's knowledge, you *teach*. For example:

My mother taught me to swim. (correct)

My mother learned me to swim. (wrong)

You can “make someone learn”, but you can't “learn him or her”. Even if the teacher and the learner are the same person, we still have to use “teach”:

I teach myself to play the guitar. (correct)

I learn to play the guitar by myself. (correct)

I learn myself to play the guitar. (wrong)

The moral is: Just remember that we never say “learn someone” in English.

‘WILL’ IN TIME CLAUSES

We never use the future tense in time clauses (introduced by words like “after”, “as soon as”, “before”, etc.) in English. Should we need to express the idea of something happening after, before, etc., something else in the future, we use the present tense in the time clause and the future tense or a command in the main clause. For example:

I will give it to him after he arrives. (correct)

I will give it to him after he will arrive. (wrong)

As soon as you get the email, let me know, please. (correct)

As soon as you will get the email, let me know, please. (wrong)

When we use “when” as an adverb synonymous to “as soon as”, the same rule as for other time clauses applies:

- I'll call you when I come home. (correct)*
- I'll call you as soon as I come home. (correct)*
- I'll call you when I will come home. (wrong)*
- Send me an email when you arrive. (correct)*
- Send me an email as soon as you arrive. (correct)*
- Send me an email when you will arrive. (wrong)*

However, “when” can also mean “at what time”. It doesn’t introduce an adverbial time clause in this sense, and we *do use* “*will*” to express the future after it in this sense. Most importantly, we use it when asking questions:

- When will you know the results? (correct)*
- At what time will you know the results? (correct)*
- When do you know the results? (wrong)*

Things get a little complicated when the question is indirect (i.e. preceded by phrases like “could you tell me”, “I’d like to ask you”, etc.). The “when” part then looks like an adverbial time clause, but it is not. For example, if the direct question is:

- When will you know the results?*

we can ask:

- Could you tell me when you will know the results? (correct)*
- Could you tell me at what time you will know the results? (correct)*
- Could you tell me when you know the results? (see below!)*

The third sentence is grammatical, but it is a different question! In the first two cases, you ask when (i.e. *at what time*) the other person will know the results, so the answer would be something like “at 5 o’clock”. In the other case, you ask the person to let you know *after*

they get the results, so they would wait until they get them (e.g. until 5 o'clock) and then tell you, "I just got the results."

However, even in the sense of "at what time", it can make sense to use the present tense after "when". Compare:

I don't know when he will come.
I don't know when he comes.

The sentences could be rephrased as:

What I don't know is: When will he come?
What I don't know is: At what time does he (habitually) come?

Both questions are grammatically correct, but only the first one asks about the specific time when "he will come". The present tense in the other one indicates we ask about what happens *habitually* (such as every day or every week). The question is in the present because the answer would be in the present too, e.g. "He usually comes at 5 o'clock."

Finally, "when" can be sometimes used in the meaning of "because at that time":

I will go jogging at 5 a.m. when there will be no cars to bother me.

The sentence is to be understood as:

I will go jogging at 5 a.m. because at that time there will be no cars to bother me.

HE WANTS THAT I DO

If you want to express that someone wants "that someone else does something", the idiomatic way to do that in English is using the phrase "to want someone to do something". For example:

He wants me to go to his birthday party. (correct)

He wants that I go to his birthday party. (unnatural)

I don't want her to know about it. (correct)

I don't want that she know(s) about it. (unnatural)

Even though the grey examples make sense grammatically (the form used is the so called subjunctive mood, e.g. “that she know”; see the next section), they don't sound natural, perhaps because the present subjunctive is quite rare in modern English. Another example:

Don't you want me to come? (correct)

Don't you want that I come? (unnatural)

Note that “need”, as a verb, follows the same pattern:

I need you to come to my office. (correct)

I need that you come to my office. (unnatural)

PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE

The present subjunctive is a really easy mood to use: it is always identical to the infinitive. It is used after phrases like “It is important that”, “I insist that”, “It is necessary that”, for example:

It is important that he be there next week. (correct)

It is important that he is there next week. (wrong)

The latter example doesn't really make sense, because “is” cannot be used with “next week”. Sometimes, however, both the present tense and the subjunctive make sense and express a different idea. Compare:



It is important that he have a computer.

It is important that he has a computer.

The former sentence says that he is required to have a computer. The latter, on the other hand, says that he already has a computer, and this fact is important.

The present subjunctive does sound quite formal, and, as we saw in the case of “want” and “need”, there is a tendency in English to replace it with the construction “for someone to do”, especially in spoken language:



It is essential that he come early. (correct, very formal)

It is essential for him to come early. (correct, preferred in speech)

SEQUENCE OF TENSES IN INDIRECT SPEECH

This and the following two sections tackle perhaps the three most confusing topics in English grammar. If you feel overwhelmed at first, you can start reading the rest and return to this section when you feel like it (you don't have to master these topics in order to be able to read the rest of the book).

When we report an action that happened in the past, i.e. when we introduce a clause by phrases like “he said that” or “you told me that”, we always describe the events from our current (present) point of view. For example, imagine you heard Adam say the following sentence:



I like chocolate.

You want to report what he said, so you say:

Adam said that he liked chocolate. (correct)

Adam said that he likes chocolate. (wrong)

Notice how “liked” is in the past tense. Why? Because Adam liked chocolate in the past, when he told us that. We don’t know if Adam still likes chocolate.

This is a hard concept to accept for those whose mother tongue does not follow the same logic. The best is probably to see it used in practice in a couple more examples:

What Jane said: *“I have to go to school.”*

Jane said that she had to go to school. (correct)

Jane said that she has to go to school. (wrong)

What John said: *“I am going to send her an email.”*

John said that he was going to send her an email. (correct)

John said that he is going to send her an email. (wrong)

What did John do? He did two things: He *said something*, and he *was going* to send an email to someone. There’s no reason to change the tense when we add the word “that” between those two pieces of information.

What if John used the future tense instead? We just use the fact that the past tense of the verb “will” is “would” (which is a topic you will learn more about in the next section):

What John said: *“I will send her an email.”*

John said that he would send her an email. (correct)

John said that he will send her an email. (wrong)

You will often hear that you are supposed to change the future tense to the conditional in reported speech, but in reality, we simply replace “will” with its past tense, just like we do with other verbs. Of course, you are free to choose whichever way is easier for you to remember.

When dealing with the present perfect, the logic stays absolutely the same: from “have done” we make “had done”:

- What Mary said: *“I have finished my homework.”*
- Mary said that she had finished her homework. (correct)*
- Mary said that she has finished her homework. (wrong)*

The last case that may cause confusion is when the original speaker already used the past tense. There is no “simple before-past tense” in English, so we make the “pastness” clear using the past perfect tense:

- What Richard said: *“I went to the cinema.”*
- Richard said that he had gone to the cinema. (correct)*
- Richard said that he went to the cinema. (wrong)*

The latter example is grammatically correct, but it doesn’t agree with what Richard said. It would only be accurate if Richard said: “I go to the cinema.”.

If the speaker used the past perfect tense instead of the simple past (which would be quite unusual), there would be no room for making it even “paster”, so we wouldn’t change it at all. For example, if someone says “I had just turned off the TV”, you would say “He said that he had just turned off the TV”.

Exceptions

There are a few cases in which there is no shift. When the original speaker merely reports a general fact which is true now as it was then, we use the present tense in the dependent clause:

- What your teacher said: *“The Earth revolves around the Sun.”*
- My teacher said the Earth revolves around the Sun. (correct)*
- My teacher said the Earth revolved around the Sun. (wrong)*

The past tense here would mean that the teacher implied the Earth revolved around the Sun only at that particular moment, which certainly is not the case.

If the speaker uses the conditional, it doesn't change either; a possibility or a wish in the past is still just a possibility or a wish in the present:

- What Linda said: *"I would like to see my brother."*
- Linda said that she would like to see her brother. (correct)*
- Linda said that she would have liked to see her brother. (wrong)*

Other "modal" ideas follow the same pattern. "Could" stays "could", "should" stays "should", and "might" stays "might". However, in the case of could, we have the option to distinguish between the conditional ("would be able to") and between the past tense ("was able to") of "can". There's no change for the conditional:

- What Gerald said: *"I could do that if I wanted."*
- Gerald said that he could do that if he wanted. (correct)*
- Gerald said that he could have done that if he wanted. (wrong)*

In the sense of the past tense of "can", it is possible to use "could", as well as "had been able to":

- What Lara said: *"I could recite the poem yesterday."*
- Lara said she had been able to recite the poem yesterday. (correct)*
- Lara said she could recite the poem yesterday. (correct)*

The last case when the reported clause doesn't change is when the verb is in the subjunctive. We've already seen that in the example with Gerald: we used "if he wanted" instead of "if he had wanted" because wanted was in the past subjunctive (which we will discuss in more detail in the next section).

The present subjunctive doesn't change either:

What Tom said: “*My boss suggests that she come to the meeting.*”
Tom said that his boss suggested that she come to the meeting. (cor.)
Tom said that his boss suggested that she came to the meeting. (wr.)

The future and the present tense

Are you afraid that we are going to have a lengthy discussion about reported speech in the future? Fortunately, you don’t have to be. Reported speech in the future doesn’t require any shift at all (and you will almost never need to use it anyway). For example:

What Anna will say: “*I work every day.*”
Anna will say that she works every day. (correct)
Anna will say that she will work every day. (wrong)

The case of the present perfect tense (“he has said”) may be a little surprising, but it has the word “present” in its name for a reason: there is no change of tenses after “has said”:

What Linda has said: “*I need a new phone.*”
Linda has said that she needs a new phone. (correct)
Linda has said that she needed a new phone. (wrong)
Linda has said that she has needed a new phone. (wrong)

THE CONDITIONAL

English conditional is one of the most common sources of mistakes for non-native speakers. Rather than starting a lengthy discussion about all possible forms and uses of the conditional, I will explain the three most common error patterns.

“If you will do this, I will do that.”

Just like in time clauses, we don't use the future tense after “if” when we speak about future actions, which makes sense because the meaning of “if” is similar to the meaning of “when”. The pattern is:

||||| *If something happens, someone will do something.*

For example:

||||| *If you come late, you will delay the whole project. (correct)*

||||| *If you will come late, you will delay the whole project. (wrong)*

However, “will” is not only an auxiliary verb of the future tense; it is also a modal verb meaning “be willing to”, “be so good/kind as to”. You may not have realized it, but you may have used it already in a couple of phrases. For example, when you say “Will you excuse me?”, you aren't asking whether the other person is going to excuse you in the future; you are asking whether they are *willing to* excuse you right now (that is, whether they are *so kind as to* excuse you now).

As such, “will” is in the present tense, so there is no reason why it couldn't be used after “if”, for example:

||||| *If you will excuse me, I must leave now.*

The structure is the same as in:

||||| *If you can excuse me, I must leave now.*

However, this is quite a special and relatively rare use. Remember: When you want to express an ordinary condition in the future, there is never “will”:

||||| *If there is a storm tomorrow, we won't go to the beach. (correct)*

||||| *If there will be a storm tomorrow, we won't go to the beach. (wrong)*

“If you would do this, I would do that.”

Just like we don't usually use “will” in future conditions, we rarely see its past tense (“would”) in hypothetical conditions in the present. You can say, for example:

||||| *If he were here, I would be so happy. (correct)*
||||| *If he would be here, I would be so happy. (probably wrong)*

The form used after “if” in the example above is the so called *past subjunctive*. What that exactly means needn't trouble you; the important point to know is that it's the same *for every verb* as the simple past tense of that verb (e.g. “if I went”, “if you did”, “if he saw”), with the exception of “to be” for which it is “were” (e.g. “if I were”, “if you were”, “if he were”). Note, however, that many native speakers consider “was” an acceptable informal alternative for “I”, “he”, “she”, and “it” as the subjunctive of the verb “be”.

The subjunctive mood describes an action that (theoretically) could be happening right now, but which (in reality) isn't happening. In the example above, the implied meaning is

||||| *If he were here, I would be so happy, but he isn't, so I am not.*

It can be used also to express that something could theoretically happen in the future, but which we consider unlikely. For example,

||||| *If she came tomorrow, I would take her to the park.*

means

||||| *It is possible (even though unlikely) that she will come tomorrow, and, if this is the case, I will take her to the park.*

A few more examples to make the concept clearer:

||||| *If John knew the answer, he would tell you. (correct)*
||||| *If John would know the answer, he would tell you. (wrong)*

If he saw what they are doing, he would call the police. (correct)

If he would see what they are doing, he would call the police. (wrong)

Notice there is no sequence of tenses in the last example. In an indicative sentence, we would say “He saw what they were doing” because “seeing” and “doing” happened at the same time. Here, however, the hypothetical situation is only “seeing”; “doing” does happen in reality, so there is no reason to use the subjunctive for it.

Speaking about the sequence of tenses... As I have already mentioned in the previous section, the subjunctive and the conditional don’t change when used in reported speech (something that could hypothetically be happening continues to be hypothetical even when we speak about it later):

What Sheila said: “If I had more money, I would buy a car.”

Sheila said that if she had more money, she would buy a car. (correct)

Sheila said that if she had had more money, she would have bought a car. (wrong)

“Would” can be used in this conditional form as the past subjunctive of “will” in the sense of “be willing to”. For example, it can be used to make a polite request:

If you would pass me that bottle... Thanks.

Another common source of would’s after if’s is the phrase “would like”. It is not only appropriate to use “would like” after “if” to make a polite suggestion; it would be wrong to make “would” disappear just because of ‘if’:

If you would like to listen to music, I could turn on the radio. (cor.)

If you liked to listen to music, I could turn on the radio. (wrong)

The latter example doesn’t really make sense; the implied meaning would be “If you liked to listen to music, I could turn on the radio, but you don’t like that, so I can’t turn it on.”

“If you would have done this, I would have done that.”

Finally, if the hypothetical situation took place in the past and the result can no longer be modified, we use the format:

||| *If X had happened, Y would have done Z.*

The implied meaning is

||||| *If X had happened, Y would have done Z, but X didn't happen, so Y didn't do Z.*

For example:

||||| *If he had had a bicycle, he could have gone on the biking trip with us.*
||| *If he would have had a bicycle, he could have gone on the biking trip with us. (wrong)*

Again, “would” can be used as a verb implying some sort of willingness. Both

||||| *If Sandy had learned for her final exam, she would have got(ten) a better grade. [“got” in the UK, “gotten” in the US]*

and

||||| *If Sandy would have learned for her final exam, she would have got(ten) a better grade.*

are grammatically correct, but the form used in the first one is more common in practice. It means that Sandy didn't learn for her final, and, as a consequence, she got a bad grade; the other one says that had sandy been *willing to* learn for her final, she would have got better grades.

As a side note: The form I used in the last sentence is an alternative to “If ... had ...”. For example:

||||| *“Had I known” = “If I had known”*

WISH + WOULD

The subjunctive mood is used to express something that (theoretically) could be happening right now, but which (in reality) isn't happening. And this is exactly what you need when you express a *wish*, for example:

I wish you were here. (correct)

I wish you would be here. (wrong)

Since it is the subjunctive, not the past tense, the correct formal form for I/he/she/it is also “were”, not was. Note, however, that it is quite common to use “was” in informal speech by native speakers:

I wish she were here. (correct, formal)

I wish she was here. (informal)

I wish she would be here. (wrong)

Even so, expressions of the form “I wish he would do something” are also *grammatically* correct but mean something else! As you have learned in the last section, “would” is the past subjunctive of the verb “will” in the sense of “be willing to”.

In this sense, you can say that “you wish someone *would do* something” in order to express that “you wish someone were willing to do something”. For example,

I wish you wouldn't smoke.

expresses that you wish the other person were so kind as not to smoke. You find the fact that they smoke *unkind* or *irritating*. When you say

I wish you didn't smoke.

you merely express that your conversational partner does smoke and that you wish otherwise, without the emotional subtext.

Note that, since the mood used after “wish” is the subjunctive, it doesn’t change in reported speech:

What Bob said: “*I wish I knew more about it.*”

Bob said that he wished he knew more about it. (correct)

Bob said that he wished he had known more about it. (wrong)

COULD/COULDN’T CARE LESS

It’s always been a mystery to me why some people say “I could care less”. If you “could care less”, you express indifference—you care somewhat, so you could care also less. You could perhaps care even more.

The point of the idiom is to express that you don’t care. In fact, you care so little that you *couldn’t care less*; you’ve already hit the bottom of how much care you give:

Oh, so he got arrested? I couldn’t care less about him. (correct)

Oh, so he got arrested? I could care less about him. (wrong)

CONTINUE DOING/TO DO

Apparently, there is a belief among English teachers in China that “continue to do” and “continue doing” mean two different things. According to them, “continue to do” means “start doing something again that was previously interrupted”, whereas “continue doing” means “to carry on the same thing you have already been doing”.

Native speakers make no such conscious distinction. The one or the other form may sound better in certain situations or be more preferred in certain parts of the English speaking world, but this has more to do with the rhythm of the language rather than there being a strict dictionary definition separating the two. For example:

I will continue to improve my skills.

I will continue improving my skills.

mean completely the same. Some speakers may prefer the first variant, some the other one, but none of these will tell you whether you stopped improving your skills and started again before.

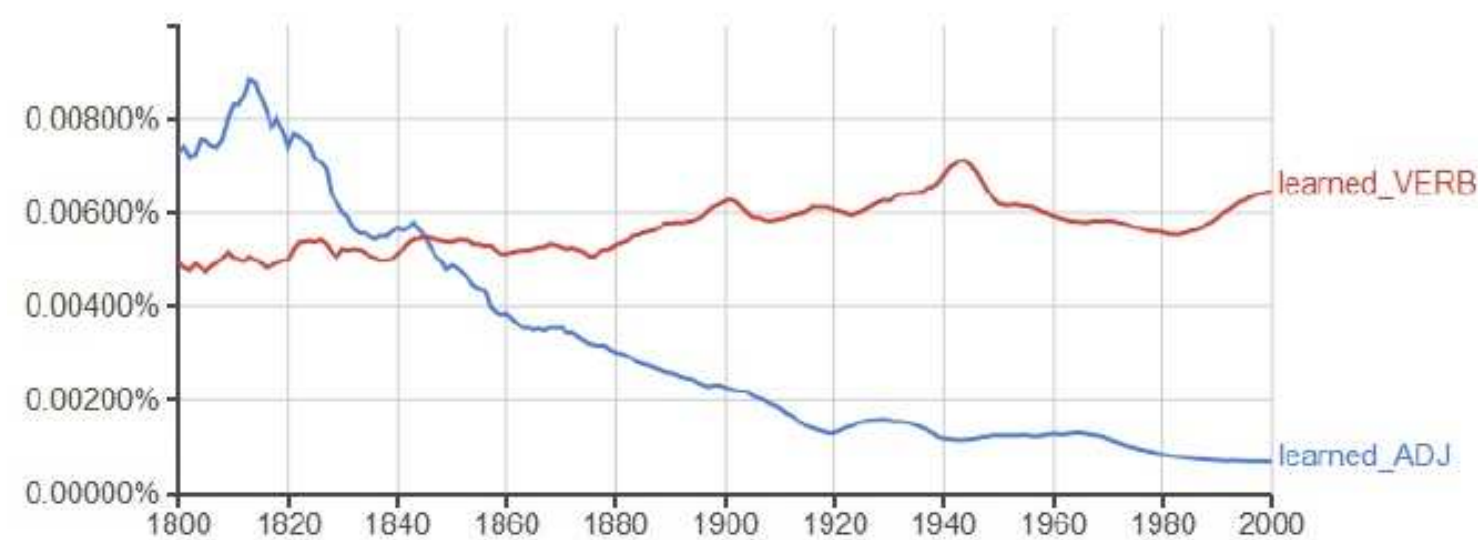
LEARNT OR LEARNED

Both “learned” and “learnt” are considered correct as the past tense and past participle of “learn”. However, the spelling “learnt” is almost non-existent in modern American English.

There was almost no difference in popularity between the two forms in the UK until around 1940s, but “learned” is now the preferred form in the UK as well, so, especially if you are writing for an international audience, it’s better to stick with “learned”.

There is also a difference in pronunciation between the two forms: “learned” is pronounced /lɜːnd/ (UK) resp. /lɜːrnd/ (US), i.e. with a “D” at the end, whereas “learnt” is pronounced /lɜːnt/.

Note that “learned” is also an adjective (now relatively uncommon) meaning “having a lot of knowledge”. Its pronunciation differs from the verb; in the UK, it is /'lɜːnɪd/, in the US, /'lɜːrniɪd/. To see how a word can fall out of fashion, take a look at the following diagram comparing the use of “learned” as a verb and as an adjective in English literature over the years (you will learn more about such diagrams in the last chapter of the book):



EFFECT OR AFFECT

Both “effect” and “affect” can be used as a noun or as a verb. The odds are that if you want to use a noun, you want to say “effect”, as in

It has a negligible effect on me. (correct)

It has a negligible affect on me. (wrong)

and if you want to use a verb, you want to say “affect”, as in

It affected me negatively. (correct)

It effected me negatively. (wrong)

“To effect” means “to implement (a policy)”; for example, one can “effect political changes”. An “affect” (which is pronounced / 'æfekt/) is a term used in psychology to mean a subjective feeling experienced in response to a stimulus. Both these terms are quite uncommon.

I CUT, YOU CUT, HE CUT

Most of the commonly used English verbs are irregular. If the past tense and the past participle differ from the present tense, it is usually not hard to remember these; for example, few learners would say “taked” instead of “took” and “taken”. However, there is a certain class of verbs that commonly cause problems: verbs whose past tense is the same as the present tense.

Take, for example, the verb “cut”. The past tense of “cut” is also “cut”, so you could say both

||||| *I cut vegetables every day in the kitchen.*

and

||||| *I cut some paper yesterday.*

Usually, you would have to guess the meaning from the context, but if the verb is in the third person singular, you can tell by looking at its ending: “he cut” can only be in the past tense because the present tense would be “he cuts”. For this reason, the entries in the following list are of the form “to **do** – he does – he did – he has done”. The purpose of this section is to allow you to get used to the past tense of these verbs; just read the list and let your subconscious internalize the right form:

- to **bet** – he bets – he bet – he has bet
- to **broadcast** – he broadcasts – he broadcast – he has broadcast
- *Note: most dictionaries list also “broadcasted” as a possible form, but this form is not commonly used in practice.*
- to **burst** – he bursts – he burst – he has burst
- to **cut** – he cuts – he cut – he has cut
- to **cost** – it costs – it cost – it has cost
- to **cast** – he casts – he cast – he has cast

- to **fit** – it fits – it fit/ed – it has fit/ed

In the US, the past tense and past participle are usually “fit”, whereas in the UK they are usually “fitted”. However, when used as adjectives, “fit” means healthy or appropriate, and fitted means designed to fit, both in the US and in the UK.

- to **forecast** – he forecasts – he forecast – he has forecast
- to **hit** – he hits – he hit – he has hit
- to **hurt** – it hurts – it hurt – it has hurt
- to **let** – he lets – he let – he has let
- to **miscast** – he miscasts – he miscast – he has miscast

Note: “to miscast” means “to choose an unsuitable actor for a role”.

- to **offset** – it offsets – it offset – it has offset

Note: “to offset” means “to compensate” in relation to costs.

- to **put** – he puts – he put – he has put
- to **quit** – he quits – he quit – he has quit
- to **recast** – he recasts – he recast – he has recast
- to **reset** – he resets – he reset – he has reset
- to **retrofit** – he retrofits – he retrofit/ed – he has retrofit/ed

Note: “to retrofit” means “to equip something with a part it didn’t originally have”. The same note as for “fit/ed” applies also here.

- to **set** – he sets – he set – he has set
- to **shed** – it sheds – it shed – it has shed
- to **shut** – he shuts – he shut – he has shut
- to **slit** – he slits – he slit – he has slit
- to **spit** – he spits – he spit/spat – he has spit/spat

Note: the form “spit” is popular in the US; in the UK the past tense is “spat”.

- to **sublet** – he sublets – he sublet – he has sublet
- to **spread** – he spreads – he spread – he has spread
- to **typecast** – he typecasts – he typecast – he has typecast

Note: usually used in the passive. For an actor “to be typecast” means “to be always given the same type of character to play”.

- to **typeset** – he typesets – he typeset – he has typeset
- to **undercut** – he undercuts – he undercut – he has undercut

Note: “to undercut” means “to sell goods below your competitor’s prices”.

- to **upset** – it upsets – it upset – it has upset
- to **wed** – he weds – he wed/ded – he has wed/ded

Note: “to wed” is an old-fashioned term for “to marry”. Both “wed” and “wedded” are in use.

- to **wet** – he wets – he wet/ted – he has wet/ted

Note: both “wet” and “wetted” are in use.

In addition to the verbs above, you should remember the verbs

- to **beat** – he beats [*beets*] – he beat [*beet*] – he has beaten
- to **read** – he reads [*reeds*] – he read [*red*] – he has read [*red*]

The past tense of “beat” is also “beat” (the past participle can be “beat” as well, but this form is often considered colloquial). The past tense and the past participle of “read” are also “read” but pronounced as “red”.

WOULD OF

The expression “would of” is a common mistake. People who learn English mainly by ear (including many native speakers, unfortunately) sometimes try to write what they pronounce as “would *uhf*” and assume it must be “would of”.

Grammatically, “of” doesn’t make sense after “would”. What they want to say is “would’ve”, a contracted form of “would have”. For example

I never would've thought that ... (correct, informal)

I never would have thought that ... (correct)

I never would of thought that ... (wrong)

Similarly, “could of” is a misspelling of “could’ve” and “should of” is a misspelling of “should’ve”.

I ALREADY/NEVER/JUST HAVE DONE

When combining the present perfect (“have + past participle”) and the words like “already”, “never”, “just”, etc., they generally come after “have”. A few examples:

She has only just arrived. (correct)

She only just has arrived. (wrong)

He has never been there. (correct)

He never has been there. (wrong)

They have already come. (correct)

They already have come. (wrong)

Note that “already” can also be moved to the end of the sentence for emphasis or to show irritation:

What do you want from me? I have done it already.

On the other hand, “yet” comes usually at the end of a sentence. Putting it right after “not” is possible, but it makes the sentence sound rather formal:

I haven't seen the document yet. (correct)

I have not yet seen the document. (correct, formal)

HOW/WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE

One thing I keep reading on the web is the expression “how does it look like?” Sadly, this sentence doesn’t make sense. The correct way to express the thought is either “what does it look like?” or “how does it look?”, for example:

I’ve heard he’s got a new car. What does it look like? (correct)

I’ve heard he’s got a new car. How does it look? (correct)

I’ve heard he’s got a new car. How does it look like? (wrong)

Although both questions are correct in this context, there’s a slight difference in meaning. “How does it look?” is usually answered with a mere adjective:

Q: I’ve heard he’s got a new car. How does it look?

A: It looks good. / It’s all right. / It’s ugly.

Of course, the thing you are asking about doesn’t have to be “it”, for example:

Q: You’ve got a new boyfriend? How does he look?

A: I think he’s cute.

On the other hand, if you ask “what does he/she/it look like”, you are inviting the other person to give you a more detailed description, usually using a comparison with a noun:

Q: You’ve got a new boyfriend? What does he look like?

A: He looks like Johnny Depp.

Nonetheless, the two sentences are interchangeable in most situations. Just remember not to use “look like” after “how”.

HOW/WHAT IS IT CALLED

When you want to ask what the name of something is, the correct question is:

What is this thing called in English? (correct)

How is this thing called in English? (wrong)

Don't let your mother tongue mislead you; in most other languages, the translation would indeed use "how", not "what", but not in English.

If you want to use "how", you can try to form the question using the verb "say":

How do you say "Bratwurst" in English? (correct)

What do you say "Bratwurst" in English? (wrong)

There is one situation when "call" and "how" could be combined. You could ask a dog owner, "How do you call your dog?" However, the answer wouldn't be its name, as you might expect, but rather something like "Come here!" or "Using a whistle." The question would be synonymous to "In what way do you call your dog?"

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SUBJECT

Word order in questions in English is something people usually get used to very fast, but there is one case that commonly causes problems. If the interrogative pronoun is already the subject of the sentence, the word order is the same as in any ordinary sentence, e.g.

Who is she? (correct)
Who does she be? (wrong)

This causes little trouble for “who is” or “who are”, but many people make a mistake when the pronoun is “what” or “which”:

What killed him? (correct)
What did kill him? (wrong)
Which computer has a Blu-ray drive? (correct)
Which computer does have a Blu-ray drive? (wrong)

LOOK FORWARD TO HEAR(ING) FROM YOU

The “to” after “look forward” can be confusing because “to” is usually used to introduce a verb, as in “want to”, “have to”, etc. “To look forward to” uses a different pattern:

I look forward to [a thing you would like to happen].

Apparently, “hear” is not a thing, so it wouldn’t make much sense to “look forward to hear from you”. The thing you are looking forward to is “hearing from you”:

I look forward to hearing from you. (correct)
I look forward to hear from you. (wrong)

As for the question whether to use “I look forward to” or “I am looking forward to”, some people consider the two completely interchangeable, but most find the phrase with “look forward to” somewhat formal and best suited for formal correspondence, whereas “to be looking forward to” is more informal and friendly:

I look forward to hearing from you. (correct, formal)
I am looking forward to hearing from you. (correct, informal)

STAY OR STAND

T*o stay* means “not to change location or value”. “To stand” means “to be in a vertical position (on your feet)”. For example:

I must stay at home today. (correct)
I must stand at home today. (wrong)

The latter sentence would imply that you can’t sit down at home today (perhaps because there are no chairs there), but this is probably not what you want to say. If you want to express that you can’t sit down, “stand” is appropriate:

I have to stand for 8 hours a day because I work manually. (correct)
I have to stay for 8 hours a day because I work manually. (wrong)

SO DON’T I/NEITHER DO I

M*e too* is an informal expression you would usually use to express that something applies to you *as well*, e.g.

A: I want to play a bit more.
B: Me too. [I also want to play a bit more.]

In a formal context (such as in an essay), we can use “so do I”, “so am I”, etc., for example:

He wants to go out. So do I.
She is angry. So am I.

So far, so good. However, the negation of “so do I” is not “so don’t I”, as some learners think, but rather “neither do I” or “nor do I”:

He doesn’t want to go out. Neither do I. (correct)
He doesn’t want to go out. So don’t I. (wrong)
She isn’t angry. Nor am I. (correct)
She isn’t angry. So aren’t I. (wrong)

If you use the informal “me too”, the negation is “me neither”:

A: We don’t want to play football.
B: Me neither. (correct) / Me too not. (wrong)

PUT/TAKE OFF ONE’S HAT

Whether you take off your hat literally or figuratively, the correct verb is “take”:

He took off his hat when he came in. (correct)
He put off his hat when he came in. (wrong)

“Put off” doesn’t really make sense here, as it means “to postpone” (you can say, for example, “she put off her homework to the last minute”).

You can figuratively “take your hat off to someone” when you want to express respect or admiration, as in the following quotation by a British comedian:

Militant feminists, I take my hat off to them. They don't like that.

— Milton Jones

The reason why learners use “put off” is probably because the opposite action is expressed using “put”:

When he left, he put his hat back on. (correct)

When he left, he took his hat back on. (wrong)

STAY/BE LEFT

Stay means “intentionally remain”, so usually only a person can stay somewhere. You can say, for example:

I stayed at home.

Lisa stayed at the airport.

When you want to express the idea that a thing or a number of things remain somewhere, the expression you would usually choose is “to be left”, as in

After he finished eating, there were only two yoghurts left in the fridge. (correct)

After he finished eating, only two yoghurts stayed in the fridge. (wrong)

The latter sentence would imply that the yoghurts were sentient beings, and only two of them decided to stay; the others left for a better life outside of the fridge.