

Business English tense review

Time clauses with different tenses review

Match at least one of these time clauses with each of the sentences below.

- when I joined my company
- in the 1990s
- the other day
- during a meeting
- recently
- since January
- hardly ever
- by Tuesday
- never
- for a year
- in a fortnight's time
- this week

- a) I didn't have a lot of experience
- b) My boss uses a laptop
- c) I was looking for a different job
- d) I worked for my present company's major competitor
- e) I have been working on my present project
- f) I last made a conference call in English
- g) I'm flying to Munich
- h) I'll finish this report
- i) I was caught making personal phone calls
- j) I've had a lot in my in-tray

Check as a class. Many different answers are possible but many matches are impossible, so please check if your matches are different from other groups'.

Make true sentences about yourself using the time clauses.

Read out one of your sentences without the time clause and see if the other students can guess which time clause is true for you.

Discussing grammar

Grammatical similarities: Aspect and voice

What are the similarities between these different forms?

- 1a) I can't talk. I'm meeting a client.
- 1b) I was just closing the deal when my direct boss walked in and ruined everything.
- 1c) My plane will be landing just as yours is taking off.

- 2a) I've been in exactly this situation many times.
- 2b) They had already accepted a rival bid by the time we had ours ready.
- 2c) They will have increased sales by 50% well before the projected time.

- 3a) A good team is made from good individuals
- 3b) The computer, like so many other inventions, was invented to help us wage war
- 3c) Wine has been produced here since the year dot.

Grammatical differences

Why are different tenses used in the contrasting sentences?

- 1a) I work for a well-known multinational
- 1b) I'm working on restructuring the company

- 2a) What were you doing when the head hunter called?
- 2b) What did you do when the head hunter called?

- 3a) When we arrived, they introduced the main conference speakers
- 3b) When we arrived, they were introducing the main conference speakers
- 3c) When we arrived, they had introduced the main conference speakers

- 4a) I've worked with several very prestigious clients
- 4b) I worked with several very prestigious clients

- 5a) I've been replying to customer enquiries all day
- 5b) I've nearly cleared the backlog of enquiries from the Xmas break

Short forms in different tenses pronunciation presentation

Listen and complete the gaps

In this country, _____ better start looking at the job ads if you want to climb the corporate ladder.

There _____ many shopping days left till Xmas.

_____ sign on for another 5 years if you just increase the bonus a little.

_____ rather have no deal at all than lose face.

_____ probably the place with the best balance between work and play in Europe.

Our competitors _____ given bribes to get that last deal, they have such a bad reputation.

Business conditions _____ improve much in the next financial year.

_____ only work if we change the whole corporate culture of the company.

If you improve your time management, _____ only find more work for you to do.

We _____ taken more holidays last year, as it would actually have improved our productivity.

If we just ignore it, _____ go away.

I don't know _____ replacing my boss, but I don't envy him.

I'm always late, _____ ?

Proper grammar's really important in Business English, but I _____ got none.

Which of the sentences above are standard spoken English? Repeat those sentences, paying attention to the pronunciation of the short forms.

What are the long forms of each example?

Which of the sentences above are true for you? Change the ones that are not. Read out the true sentences and discuss them with your partner.

Suggested answers and script

Time clauses with different tenses review

If students come up with an example that is not clearly wrong or right, ask them to explain what they imagine the circumstances/ situation of the sentence to be.

Grammatical similarities: Aspect and voice

1. All the sentences express a temporary action that is in progress at a particular time.
2. All the sentences connect two different times, e.g. the present and the past for the Present Perfect.
3. All are passives, i.e. the grammatical subject of the sentence is not the same as the “agent” who is doing the action.

Grammatical differences

1. The first is seen as generally true or permanent, whereas the second is seen as temporary.
2. The first is a (temporary) action in progress when something else happened (or interrupted), whereas the second is a simple sequence of events.
3. Similar to number 2 above, but also with an action that is completed before another happens (Past Perfect)
4. Contrast between an unfinished time (perhaps ‘in my life’ or ‘this month’) with a finished time (‘last year’ or ‘in my last job’).
5. Contrast between a sentence where the action is important (replying) and where the result is important (cleared the backlog). Point out that “How much?” is usually answered with the Present Perfect Simple and “How long?” with the Present Perfect Continuous.

Short forms in different tenses pronunciation presentation script

You will need to read out or record the complete sentences including the short forms below. Make sure they sound as natural as possible.

- You’d
- aren’t
- She’ll
- They’d
- here’s
- must’ve
- won’t
- that’ll
- they’ll
- should’ve
- it’ll
- who’s
- aren’t I
- ain’t

The only one that is not ‘standard’ spoken English is “ain’t”

This is quite straightforward. Perhaps the most difficult one is “had better”, which some students think is “would better”.