

Narrative tenses by Rachael Nobbs

Age: Adults and young adults
Level: Strong intermediate and above (could be adapted for lower or higher levels)
Objective: To review form, meaning and use of narrative tenses
Key skills: Speaking, reading, writing
Materials: Worksheets 1 and 2, board, notebooks and pens

Pre-teaching vocabulary

1. Tell the students that the aim of the lesson is to review narrative tenses. In order to do this you need to first clarify some vocabulary. Start by eliciting the differences between *steal*, *burgle* and *rob*. The students could do this by using dictionaries.

Concept-check the meaning of each word by asking students questions, e.g. *Can you steal a person? Can you rob a bank? Can you steal a car?*

verb forms	noun	person	meaning
steal – stole – stolen	theft	thief	to take something illegally (general)
burgle – burgle – burgled	burglar	burglar	to steal things from a building (especially from a house)
rob – robbed – robbed	robbery	robber	to steal money from a place (especially a bank), organization or person

2. Give students the following key words and check their understanding of any that may be unfamiliar (e.g. *windscreen* and the capital nouns – if you think your students will not know that a Jaguar and a Porsche are expensive cars, change these).

windscreen	theatre	London	stolen	Jaguar
driving	rich couple	home	police	burgled

Task

3. Tell the students that these words are part of a 'true' story about a 'clever' crime (the story is, in fact, an urban myth that, in my experience, isn't well-known enough for most students to have heard of).

Ask the students to work in pairs or small groups and compose a story using the above words. They can use the words in any order but shouldn't change the form. They should be encouraged to use their imaginations but not to worry about the form of the verbs at this stage. One person in each group should make a note of the story.

Reporting on the task

4. When the students have finished, ask some of them to read their stories out or, if you have time, get them to swap groups / pairs and tell each other their stories. To encourage the other students to listen, ask them to check they have used all the key words. In

feedback, the teacher can ask which stories they liked the best but there is no need to do any error correction of narrative tenses yet.

Grammar focus

5. Give out Worksheet 1: The story. Ask them to read it through to compare how similar or different it is from their stories. When they have finished reading they should answer the comprehension questions in pairs to check their understanding.

6. Give out Worksheet 2: Grammar focus and ask the students to do the first task (underlining verbs). Feedback and check that they understand the past simple is the most common form as it is used to narrate the main events (in chronological order).

Exercise 1 key: *There are four tenses used in total: past simple, past continuous, past perfect and present. The most common tense used in the story is the past simple.*

7. Ask them to complete the table and check that they understand the different forms of the past perfect, e.g. *had been burgled* is passive (*somebody had burgled their house* is the active form but is not very natural when we don't know who did this action); *had broken down* is active. Check that the students understand how these differ in form and meaning.

Exercise 2 key:

tense	examples from text
<i>past simple</i>	<i>were, lived, worked, saw, rushed, discovered, felt, called said, got back, borrowed, went, had</i>
<i>past continuous</i>	<i>were driving, was sitting</i>
<i>past perfect</i>	<i>had found, had been stolen (passive), had broken down, had been burgled (passive)</i>

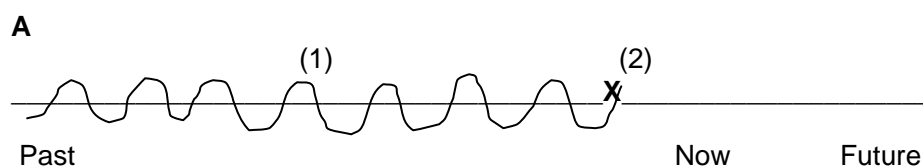
8. Students can do exercises 3 and 4 before you do feedback as a whole group. It's important that they understand the past perfect is used like a 'flashback' when we are already talking about the past and want to refer to something that happens before this (the past in the past); it has no connection to the present (make sure they don't confuse it with the present perfect).

Exercise 3 key: c

Exercise 4 key: a. continuous; b. simple; c. simple

You could use a timeline to contrast its use with that of the past simple. The past continuous describes events in progress (sometimes interrupted by shorter actions in the past simple) and can also be used for descriptive details in the past (e.g. *the birds were singing*). The timelines below illustrate the differences between the past continuous (A) and the past simple (B) using examples from the story.

Timelines:



They were driving home (1) when they saw their car (2).

B

	(1)	(2)	
	X	X	
Past			Now Future

We borrowed the car (2) as our car had broken down (1).

9. Exercise 5 checks the meaning and use of the three different narrative tenses focused on. If you are short of time or you think it isn't necessary, it could be omitted.

Exercise 5 key: *Yesterday I woke up and the sun was shining. I got up and had a shower. While I was having my shower, I remembered that I'd had a very strange dream.*

Application

10. Ask the students whether they used all the tenses correctly, then get them to go back to their original stories and correct their use of the three different verb forms. Also encourage them to add details using the past continuous and incorporate 'flashback' events or background information using the past perfect. Monitor their use of the key tenses and go over good usage and correct misuse in the final feedback stage.

Follow-up

Optional follow-up homework could be:

1. the students write a second draft of the story they've been working on in class
OR
the students write another story entitled 'The perfect crime'
OR
give students another title or opening line to a different story for them to write.
2. In the follow-up class, students could tell each other their stories then regroup and retell before reporting back one of their partner's stories (partners listen for additions, omissions and alterations).

Adapting for other levels

The story could be adapted to omit the use of past perfect passive for lower levels. It could also be adapted for higher levels as a review and include an example of past perfect continuous, which the teacher would then need to include in the 'grammar focus' stage.

Worksheet 1: The story

Jemima and Jeremy were a young, rich couple who lived and worked in the centre of London. Jeremy's father had found them both lucrative jobs so they lived very comfortably.

One Sunday evening, they were driving home in their Jaguar, when they saw a car, closely resembling their Porsche, speeding in the opposite direction. They rushed home and to their horror, they discovered that their Porsche was not there; it had been stolen! They felt terrible and called the police, who said that they would do what they could to help them.

However, to their surprise, when they got back home from work the following day, their precious car was sitting outside their house. On the windscreen was a note, which said:

"Thanks very much, we just borrowed the car to go to an important meeting as our car had broken down. Here are some tickets for the best seats at the theatre for tomorrow night."

The next night, the couple happily went to the theatre and had a wonderful time. But when they got home, they were horrified to find that their house had been burgled.

Comprehension check

Answer the following questions.

a. Why did the couple feel terrible in paragraph 2?

b. Why did they go to the theatre?

c. Who had burgled their house?

Worksheet 2: Grammar focus

- Underline all the verbs in the story. How many tenses are there? Which tense is the most common in a story?
- Find examples of the tenses in the story and complete the chart:

tense	examples from text
	were, lived, worked
past perfect	

- Look at the examples of the past perfect and decide which of the sentence endings (a-c) completes the rule. Circle the correct answer.

We use the past perfect ...

- ... to describe actions or situations which happened a long time ago.
- ... to describe past actions which are relevant in the present.
- ... when we are talking about the past and we want to talk about something that happened before this time.

- Look at the examples of the past continuous and past simple and complete the rules with *simple* or *continuous*:

- We use the past _____ to show that something was in progress (it had started but had not finished).

b. We use the past _____ for shorter, completed actions.

c. We use the past _____ for consecutive past actions.

5. Check your understanding by putting the verbs in the following passage in the correct past tense (simple, continuous or perfect)

Yesterday I _____ (wake up) and the sun
_____ (shine). I _____ (get up) and
_____ (have) a shower. While I _____
(have) my shower, I _____ (remember) that I
_____ (have) a very strange dream.

6. Now, go back to your stories and check your use of narrative tenses. Correct any mistakes you have made.