

Perfecting the Present: Brushing up your Skills in the Present Perfect Tense (part one)

Fathom co-founder, Kevin McRobb tackles one of the thorniest grammar issues there is. Check out part two [here](#).



By far one of the most frequent problems we encounter with structure while teaching English grammar is the present perfect tense and its use. This probably has its roots in the fact that it doesn't exist in Polish or other Slavic languages. However, this is not a uniquely Slavic problem. Language learners across the world often struggle to use it correctly. You might wonder in that case: what's the point of using it at all?

Using perfect tenses properly – and focusing on accuracy more widely – allows you to be more efficient while giving and receiving information. In short, you can tell me more with fewer

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words. If you can use tenses in the right way at the right moment, you will sound more eloquent and be able to express what you want better. You will also notice after picking it up that present perfect is everywhere in English.

The Nuts and Bolts



A lot of Poles whose skills are rusty will tell me things like:

“I work in my present job for nine years,”

Or occasionally:

“I worked in my present job for nine years,”

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The trouble we have with such sentences is that the listener isn't sure whether you're speaking about the past or the present. Do you still work there today? Is it ancient history? There's no way to tell!

What if there were a dedicated method of indicating to me, the listener, that this action ('work') started in the past, but remains true in the present? This is where the present perfect tense comes into its own.

The function of a perfect tense — including the others: past perfect and future perfect — is to build connections between times, or bridges as I like to call them. It's used to show us that this action straddles across more than one section of the timeline.

The correct solution to the errors above looks like this:

"I have worked in my present job for nine years,"

We always use 'have' then the verb in its past participle form (I prefer to call it third form) to construct the present perfect tense. As soon as you hear this type of sentence, you should be aware that there's a connection to now in there. We use 'for' in the present perfect to express a period of time an action has lasted, e.g. *twelve months; four hours; my entire life*.

Another potential answer looks like this:

"I have worked in my present job since 2009."

We use 'since' in the present perfect to express the specified time the action started, e.g. *January; Summer 2006; when I was a child*.

In it for the Long Haul

Given the business climate today, nine years seems like a long time to stay in one position. It'd be reasonable in many cases to say that it's permanent; that you don't foresee it changing any time soon. You might have learned in another lesson that there's a clear distinction in English grammar between the permanent and the temporary.

Let's say that you're a summer intern on a fixed-term contract of three months. You're currently in the second month and you're planning to go back to university when the contract expires. Is there a special way of emphasising that you see this situation changing in the near future?

The solution is to use the present perfect in its continuous form. We'll begin with 'have' and we'll use the third form, just like the previous example. In the case of present perfect continuous, this third form should always be the verb, 'to be'.

Following that we'll add an '-ing' suffix to 'work' so that we can easily see that it's a continuous form, just as we do in the present or the past. Covering each of these steps will leave us with a sentence that looks something like this:

"I have been working in my present job for 2 months,"

And hey presto! You've made the present perfect continuous!

The concept above can also be adapted to the verb, 'to live':

"I have lived in the same tenement block since I was a baby,"

This speaker sees his current situation as a long term one, which is unlikely to change in the near future.

“I have been living with my parents for the last two months,”

This speaker however, sees her situation as a temporary one. She plans to leave her parents’ home in the near future.

But Hang on, There’s More!

I want to make it clear before I finish this post: this is *not* the entire story with present perfect. We plan to tackle each of its nuances in a number of future posts on the Fathom Blog. Until then, keep practising and check out [part 2](#). Have an excellent day, wherever you may be!

Do you need more help with the present perfect tense? Share you experience in the comments below!