

# ***Perfecting the Present: Brushing up your Skills in the Present Perfect Tense (part two)***

*Fathom co-founder, Kevin McRobb continues his analysis of one of the thorniest grammar issues there is. Part one can be found [here](#).*



Have you ever struggled with the present perfect? Have you ever slammed your book shut in frustration from it? Have you read this blog post yet?

If the answer is yes to the first two, you probably should read this post. The three questions in the first paragraph were written in, well, you guessed it: *present perfect*. In fact, the present perfect has a multitude of uses in English, which we've been trying to demystify in this [comprehensive series](#) of posts.

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Today I want to focus on only one facet of this chronically misunderstood tense though: that is when we use it to speak about life experiences.

If you're reading this in English, you probably know something about the past simple tense – used to discuss events that started *and* finished in the past. The key condition for correct use is that I, the listener, must understand clearly *when* the event in question took place. The easiest way to achieve this is simply by telling me in your sentence:

*“I visited Paris last February.”*

*“I arrived home around 18:00 yesterday.”*

Seeing a time clause like: ‘...*when I was a child*’, ‘...*yesterday afternoon*’ or ‘*during my thirtieth birthday party...*’ should act as a signal to you that past simple should be nearby. We use the past simple to talk about experiences when we're primarily interested in *the time of the stated event*. Present perfect moves the listener's focus onto the *event or action itself*.

## *Never have I ever...*



*“Have you ever visited Paris?”*

When we ask a ‘*have you ever...*’ question, we are not particularly interested in *when* exactly the action took place. What we’re really asking is:

*“Any time in your life, from when you were born until today, have you visited Paris?”*

Without present perfect, English grammar would require us to respond with something like:

*“Yes. I visited Paris for the first time with my parents when I was twelve years old. Then I visited for the second time during a*

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*summer exchange programme when I was nineteen years old. The third time I visited Paris was for my best friend's birthday party when I was twenty five, and the fourth time was last year, to celebrate my wedding anniversary."*

Conversations move fast, meaning that this depth of detail can often be stifling, tiresome or simply unnecessary. By using the present perfect, we're able to enhance the relevance of our response by condensing all of that unnecessary information down into a mere seven words:

*"Yes, I have visited Paris four times."*

Students often ask me why using the past simple is a no-no in this type of question. Why not 'were you ever...', 'did you ever...', and so on? I warn you that Americans have a slightly [different take](#) on this subject, but I see it like this: it sounds to me when you ask that question in the past simple, that the person being referred to is dead and gone.

*"Robert travelled widely throughout his life. He visited Paris four times, Berlin six times, and his favourite city, Moscow, an incredible fourteen times."*

- a funeral director

We should start talking about experiences in the past simple as soon as somebody dies, even five minutes later. To show that Robert is in fact alive and well, we have to convert everything here into present perfect:

*“Robert has travelled widely throughout his life. He has visited Paris four times, Berlin six times, and his favourite city, Moscow, an incredible fourteen times!”*

- Robert’s Twitter bio (which he continues to use daily!)

Moving back to the Paris example, you should use the past simple when you ask for details, e.g.

*“So what did you see in Paris?”*

*“Where did you stay?”*

*“Who did you meet?”*

*“How was the food?”*

Such is the effect of present perfect, that it’s normally enough to use it *one time only* when talking about life experiences.

Using present perfect very much anchors us to the here and now. I will reiterate though, that this post covers only a small (but incredibly important) fraction of its uses. Keep an eye on the Fathom blog for more on this topic in the near future!

*Which European cities have you visited? Which were your favourites? Why did you enjoy them so much? Let us know in the comments!*