

Watch out for these problems . . .

- Students use *was* with the base form as an 'easy' past form: *X I was go to the shops.* *X She was listen to me.*
- Students overuse the /d/ pronunciation: *X I walked /wɔ:lkɪd/ to school.* Some students use it for many verbs where it is inappropriate. Help by pointing out that a word like 'walked' has a /t/ ending and is actually one syllable, not two. Get them to try saying it as one syllable.
- Students have wrong ideas about the past simple: Depending on their first language students may have false assumptions about the limits of past simple use. They may wrongly think that it is only used for story narratives or only for single events. Watch out for the incorrect learner assumption that use of the past simple always means 'distant' past. Using the past simple does not indicate how far back in the past something happened; we can use the same tense whether it happened a few seconds ago or back in the Jurassic Age.

Teaching tip: gestures

Many teachers use a simple 'pointing backwards, over their shoulder' gesture to indicate 'past'. This is useful as a quick correction technique when a student forgets to use a past tense in a sentence. Instead of giving a spoken correction, simply use the gesture and see if the learner can correct themselves.

33 Past simple: irregular verbs

Form

Affirmative statements (irregular verbs)

Irregular past simple verbs have different and unpredictable forms. They need to be learnt individually.

run → *ran*, *fly* → *flew*, *go* → *went*

Some irregular past forms are spelt the same as the base form (though may be pronounced differently).

put → *put* (same pronunciation)

read → *read* (change of vowel sound)

Irregular past simple forms are made using the verb listed in the second column of a standard verb table:

	1	2	3
buy	bought	bought	bought
drive	drove	drove	driven

I went to London.
She ate supper.
He wrote a letter.
We read it.

Presentation

wake	→	woke
see	→	saw
eat	→	ate
go	→	went
run	→	ran
find	→	found
take	→	took
break	→	broke

Story seeds

- 1) Dictate a list of 15–20 past simple verbs (*woke, sat, ate, went, ran, found, took, broke*).
- 2) Check if students have written them down correctly. Work through the list and find out if students can guess which verbs they are the past form of. Build a table on the board listing infinitive and past form (*wake / woke, see / saw, eat / ate*).
- 3) Ask students to work in pairs to make a story using all the verbs in the order you dictated. They can make a story about anything they wish but they must use the given verbs in exactly the order you dictated (ie verb 1 must be in the story before verb 2).
- 4) Compare stories.

Practice

Chat about last night

The classic lesson warm-up when you chat with students as they arrive in class is often a very good, natural practice of the past simple. You can say 'What did you do last night?' or 'Tell me about the weekend.'

Present simple to past simple

Build up a story of a daily routine in the present simple (*Jonas usually gets a lift to school. He meets his friends at the gate*). Then build a contrasting picture of what happened on a specific day last week (*He walked to school. He met a teacher at the gate*).

I went out today

Write up the first ten letters of the alphabet on the board. Elicit or tell students past verb forms (regular or irregular) for each letter (*ate, bought, caught, dream, explained, fought, gave, heard, invited, jumped*). Write them up on the board. One player starts by saying 'I went out today and I . . .' They should then complete the sentence with the 'A' verb and an appropriate ending (*ate an apple*. NB: verb and noun both begin with A). The second player can then continue by repeating the first sentence and adding a second sentence with a new verb and noun, both starting with B (*I ate an apple and bought a book*). As the game continues through the alphabet students have to remember and repeat more and more. If students enjoy it, you could try extending it further into the alphabet (*kissed, left, met*).

Storytelling

Narratives of all kinds are at the heart of work on the past simple. Try telling your class anecdotes about your life or little stories and jokes you collect from different sources. In class you can try different techniques to keep the activities varied. Tell a story and then . . . (a) the class repeats it afterwards in pairs (b) you retell it with gaps for each verb which the class call out (c) you retell it with mistakes which the class should try to spot and correct.

A few common ideas and contexts for past simple practice

Holidays (*Flea, stayed, visited, saw, bought, climbed, enjoyed*)

Shopping trips (*looked, asked, tried, chose, paid*)

Losing something (*went, lost, looked, asked, remembered, found*)

Concept questions

- **Carrie gave me a new clock.** Is Carrie giving me a clock now? (No) Will she give me a new clock tomorrow? (No) When did she give me the clock? (*In the past*) Recently? (*We don't know*) A long time ago? (*We don't know*)
- **I went to Auckland on holiday last year.** Am I in Auckland now? (No) Am I going to Auckland in the future? (No) When did I go to Auckland? (*Last year*)

Watch out for these problems . . .

- **Students use an incorrect past form:** (often creatively generating a regular ending for an irregular verb) ✗ *We goed to the beach.* ✗ *She flied with Ethel Athines.*
- **Students avoid using a past form:** ✗ *After the pub Russell go to the bus station.* ✗ *Last year she work in an office.*