The Two German Past Tenses

The simple past and the present perfect

By aboutGerman.com

**Talking about the past in German**

Although both English and German use the **simple past tense** (*Imperfekt*) and the **present perfect tense** (*Perfekt*) to talk about past events, there are some major differences in the way each language uses these tenses. If you need to know more about the structure and grammar of these tenses, see the links below. Here we will focus on when and how to use each past tense in German.

**The Simple Past** (*Imperfekt*)  
We'll start with the so-called "simple past" because it's simple. Actually, it's called "simple" because it's a one-word tense (**hatte**, **ging**, **sprach**, **machte**) and isn't a compound tense like the present perfect (**hat gehabt**, **ist gegangen**, **habe gesprochen**, **haben gemacht**). To be precise and technical, the *Imperfekt* or "narrative past" tense refers to a past event that is not yet fully completed (Latin *perfect*), but I have never seen how this applies to its actual use in German in any practical way. However, it is sometimes useful to think of the "narrative past" as being used to describe a series of connected events in the past, i.e., a narrative. This is in contrast to the present perfect described below, which (technically) is used to describe isolated events in the past.

Used less in conversation and more in print/writing, the simple past, narrative past, or imperfect tense is often described as the more "formal" of the two basic past tenses in German and it is found primarily in books and newspapers. Therefore, with a few important exceptions, for the average learner it is more important to recognize and be able to read the simple past than to use it. (Such exceptions include helping verbs such as **haben**, **sein**, **werden**, the modal verbs, and few others, whose simple past tense forms are often used in conversation as well as written German.)

The German simple past tense may have several English equivalents. A phrase such as, "er spielte Golf," can be translated into English as: "he was playing golf," "he used to play golf," "he played golf," or "he did play golf," depending on the context.

As a general rule, the farther south you go in German Europe, the less the simple past is used in conversation. Speakers in Bavaria and Austria are more likely to say, "Ich bin in London gewesen," rather than "Ich war in London." ("I was in London.") They view the simple past as more aloof and cold than the present perfect, but you should not be overly concerned about such details. Both forms are correct and most German-speakers are thrilled when a foreigner can speak their language at all! - Just remember this simple rule for the simple past: it is used mostly for narration in books, newspapers, and written texts, less in conversation. Which brings us to the next German past tense...

**The Present Perfect** (*Perfekt*)  
The present perfect is a compound (two-word) tense formed by combining an auxiliary (helping) verb with the past participle. Its name comes from the fact that the "present" tense form of the auxiliary verb is used, and the word "perfect," which, as we mentioned above, is Latin for "done/completed." (The **past perfect** [pluperfect, *Plusquamperfekt*] uses the simple past tense of the auxiliary verb.) This particular German past tense form is also known as the "conversational past," reflecting its primary use in conversational, spoken German.

Because the present perfect or conversational past is used in spoken German, it is important to learn how this tense is formed and used. However, just as the simple past is not used exclusively in print/writing, neither is the present perfect used only for spoken German. The present perfect (and past perfect) is also used in newspapers and books, but not as often as the simple past. Most grammar books tell you that the German present perfect is used to indicate that "something is finished at the time of speaking" or that a completed past event has results that "continue into the present." That can be useful to know, but it is more important to recognize some of the major differences in the way the present perfect is used in German and English.

For instance, if you want to express, "I used to live in Munich" in German, you can say, "Ich habe in München gewohnt." - a completed event (you no longer live in Munich). On the other hand, if you want to say, "I have lived/have been living in Munich for ten years," you can't use the perfect tense (or any past tense) because you're talking about an event in the present (you are still living in Munich). So German uses the present tense (with *schon seit*) in this situation: "Ich wohne schon seit zehn Jahren in München," literally "I live since ten years in Munich." (A sentence structure that Germans sometimes mistakenly use when going from German to English!)

English-speakers also need to understand that a German present perfect phrase such as, "er hat Geige gespielt," can be translated into English as: "he has played (the) violin," "he used to play (the) violin," "he played (the) violin," "he was playing (the) violin," or even "he did play (the) violin," depending on the context. In fact, for a sentence such as, "Beethoven hat nur eine Oper komponiert," it would only be correct to translate it into the English simple past, "Beethoven composed only one opera," rather than the English present perfect, "Beethoven has composed only one opera." (The latter incorrectly implies that Beethoven is still alive and composing.)