

For, since and ago

Part of what makes the tense system in English complicated is how it interacts with adverbs ... and part of what makes adverbs complicated is how they interact with the tense system.

The alternative, more optimistic, perspective is that the interaction between verbs and adverbs gives the learner a definite set of tools to help him or her understand how they work. So, let's take the optimistic route and see just how they work together. To do so, we'll look at how 'for', 'since' and 'ago' interact with both the perfect and the past simple verb forms in English.

'Since' and the present perfect

A clear and simple link exists between the adverb 'since' and the perfect tenses. You'll recall that the present perfect is used when we want to focus on the relationship between past events and the present. Visually, you can imagine this as standing at a moment in the past and looking towards the present.

Ex: The number of deaths by prescription-drug overdose **has been growing** steadily **since** the 1990s.

In this case, the speaker is placing him- or herself at the beginning of the 1990s and looking towards the present. Typically, when doing so, one would use the adverb 'since'. Conversely, if we use the adverb 'since', we will almost definitely use a perfect form. Generally, the adverb 'since' is followed by a date, but it can also be followed by an event that took place at a specific point in time in the past.

Ex: I've been thinking about Kurzeil **since** I met him.

Here are the general guidelines for using 'since':

- ✓ We are talking about a situation, action or actions that started in the past.
- ✓ The starting point of the situation, action or actions is clearly indicated; the adverb 'since' precedes this point in time in the sentence.
- ✓ The situation, action or actions continue until the present.

'Ago' and the past simple

Similarly, there is a clear and simple link between the past simple and the adverb 'ago'. The past simple (also known as the preterit) is used to refer to events that are connected to a distinct point in the past, and which are distinct from the present time.

Ex: Krispy Kreme is known for delicious yeast-raised doughnuts, made with the recipe that Vernon Rudolph's uncle **acquired** from a French chef all of those years **ago**.

'Ago' is used with the past simple tense to show how far away from the present a situation or event occurred. Usually that distance is expressed as a definite quantity (ie. five years, ten minutes, two days), but it can also be expressed more generally, as in the example above (all those years).

Here are the general guidelines for using 'ago':

- ✓ We are talking about a finished action, actions or situation in the past.
- ✓ We want to show the distance in time between that action, actions or situation and the present. That distance is indicated before the adverb 'ago'.
- ✓ We often use the adverb 'ago' with the past simple. We don't use it with the present perfect or present perfect continuous.

'For' and duration

The adverb 'for' is a little trickier, since it is used to show how much time an action or situation lasted. As such, it can be used with any tense, except for the present continuous and the past continuous.

Examples:

Oscar Wilde **was sent** to prison **for** two years.

The value of Krispy Kreme stock **had surged for** three years prior to crashing in 2004.

Excessive opioid use **has been** a problem in the United States **for** decades.

Kurzeil has developed a diet that he believes **will extend** his life **for** many years, if not indefinitely.

Here are the guidelines for the use of the adverb 'for':

- ✓ Use it to show how long an action, actions or situation lasts.
- ✓ Do not use it if you want to say when an action, actions or situation started (in this case, you would use 'since' or 'ago').
- ✓ Do not use it with the present continuous or past continuous tenses.
- ✓ Put it in front of the duration you want to express.