

Lesson 1 – Mixed Present Tenses

In today's lesson, we're going to focus on the simple present and present continuous (also called the "present progressive") and a few more advanced details involved in the way these tenses are used.

Basic Difference: Simple Present & Present Continuous

The simple present is used for actions or states that are generally true, or for events that happen regularly:

- I **drive** home from work every day. I usually **listen** to music in the car.

The present continuous is used for actions that are happening NOW, in the moment of speaking:

- *(on your cell phone in the car)*
I **'m driving** home from work right now. I **'m listening** to a great new CD at the moment.



Sometimes the present continuous is used to emphasize a situation that is temporary:

- I **work** for a cosmetics company. This month I **'m working** on our new line of nail polish.
- My brother **lives** in Chicago. At the moment he's between apartments, so he's **living** with a friend.

"Signal words" that are typically used with the simple present include adverbs of frequency, such as:

- never, sometimes, usually, generally, occasionally, seldom, rarely, hardly ever, always,* every day/week/month/year, once/twice a day/week/month/year

**There is an exception, which you will learn in the "Special Cases" part of this lesson*

"Signal words" that are typically used with the present continuous include:

- now, right now, at the moment, currently
- today, this week/month/year

Put it into practice!

Answer these questions with the present simple. What's one thing that you...

- always do?
I always...
- usually do?
I usually...
- sometimes do?
I sometimes...
- rarely do?
I rarely...
- never do?
I never...

When NOT to Use Present Continuous

There are two situations in which we tend NOT to use the present continuous.

1. With verbs that describe states of existence, not actions

- This bike **costs** \$150.
~~This bike **is costing** \$150.~~
- He currently **owns** a boat.
~~He currently **is owning** a boat.~~
- We used to drink coffee, but now we **prefer** tea.
~~We used to drink coffee, but now we **are preferring** tea.~~



You can see that even though we're using signal words that normally go with the present continuous, like "currently" and "now," we use the simple present. Verbs

that describe states of existence rather than actions are often called "state verbs" or "stative verbs." They tend to include...

- **Verbs of opinion:**
know, believe, understand, recognize, prefer, agree/disagree, approve/disapprove, suppose, suspect
- **Verbs of possession:**
have, own, belong, possess, include, owe
- **Verbs involving perception of the senses:**
hear, smell, see, feel, appear, seem, resemble
- **Verbs of emotion:**
love, hate, like, want, need, desire, wish
- **Verbs that describe intrinsic states/qualities:**
weigh, contain, consist, measure, cost, exist, depend, deserve, involve, matter

For example sentences with these verbs, please see this lesson on [Stative & Dynamic Verbs](#).

2. With verbs that perform the action they refer to

These are usually verbs that make some sort of statement:

- I **admit** that I was wrong.
- No. Absolutely not. I **refuse** to let you copy my work.
- We **promise** we'll do a good job.



Other examples include **acknowledge, advise, confess, congratulate, declare, deny, forbid, guarantee, order, permit, predict, remind, request, thank.**

However, in casual spoken English, some of these verbs are occasionally used in the present continuous form:

- OK, OK, you win. **I'm admitting** defeat.
- **I'm begging you** to forgive me.
- **I'm warning you**, this class is not for beginners.

Verbs with Different Meanings/Uses in Simple Present & Present Continuous

1. Verbs with different meanings

Some verbs have two meanings - one of which can be used in the present continuous, and the other of which cannot. One good example is the verb **have**. When **have** is used for *possession*, it cannot be continuous. But when used for eating meals (having lunch) or experiencing things (having fun), it can be continuous:

- I didn't use to have any pets, but now I **have** a cat.
~~I'm having a cat.~~
- I'm **having** dinner right now, could I call you back later?
- We're **having** a great time on vacation!
- He's **having** trouble finishing the project.

Here are a few other verbs that follow this pattern:

- This blue stone **looks** like a sapphire.
(looks = appearance)
- She's **looking** at the pictures in the album.
(looking = directing her eyes at something)
- The boss **feels** that the staff doesn't respect him.
(feels = has an impression/opinion)
- I was sick for a couple days, but now I'm **feeling** better.
(feeling = physical health)
- These cookies **taste** very sugary.
(taste = the quality possessed by the cookies)
- Now the chef **is tasting** the sauce to see if it needs more seasoning.
(tasting = the action of eating the food to test its taste)

2. Mental state verbs that can be finished or in progress

With some verbs that describe a mental state, we can use the present simple to imply that we are sure about something, and the present continuous to imply that we are still considering it (we are not yet sure):

- I **think** that taking an intensive English course is the best way to learn.
(= my opinion on this is formed; I am sure of my belief)
- I'**m thinking** about taking a trip around the world.
(= I'm still in the process of considering it; I am not sure if I will go or not)
- I **realize** that this is important to you.
(= I am sure that this is important to you)
- Nowadays I'**m realizing** how much I still have left to learn!
(= my realization of this fact is currently in progress)
- I **regret** dropping out of school before finishing my degree.
(= I am sure that dropping out of school was bad)
- It just started raining. Now I'**m regretting** leaving my umbrella at home.
(= the regret is forming in this moment)
- We **consider** this product to be the best value for the price.
(= we have formed the opinion and we are sure)
- We'**re considering** buying a motorcycle... do you think we should?
(= we are still in the process of deciding whether or not to buy it)



However, the "mental state verbs" **believe, conclude, know,** and **prefer** are *never* used in the present continuous.

Special Situations

1. Using the present, not the past, in informal stories & jokes

When telling a story to friends, native speakers sometimes tell it using present tenses, not past tenses – as if the story were happening at that moment.

*"Yesterday, I'**m walking** to class, drinking some coffee and carrying a ton of books... when suddenly this dog **runs** up to me and **starts** jumping up and trying to lick my face. So I'**m trying** to fend off this dog, and the owner **is** nowhere to be found. Then I **lose** my balance and **fall** over, and my books and papers **go** flying everywhere. That's when a guy jogging in the park **sees** what's going on and **comes** to my rescue, and he **manages** to scare off the overly friendly dog..."*

Since these events happened yesterday, you could also say everything in the past:
"Yesterday I **was walking** to class... when suddenly this dog **ran** up to me

and **started** jumping up..." However, telling the story in the present is simply a way to make the story seem more "alive" and help the listeners experience the action.

2. Using the present, not the past, when describing events in books or movies

Similarly to the example above, when describing events in books or movies, we often use present tenses:

- In the beginning of the movie, terrorists **kidnap** the president's daughter.
- The main character **discovers** something surprising about his family in Chapter 3.
- At the end of the film, the father and son finally **forgive** each other.



We can also use past tenses. It's possible to use either present or past tenses when recounting the stories in books and movies.

3. Using the present, not the past, in newspaper headlines

In newspaper headlines, publishers often use the present tense rather than the past tense to describe events that have happened in the recent past. This makes them seem more "immediate," as if the reader is in the middle of the action:

- Company **Opens** New HQ in China
- Deadly Factory Accident **Kills 3, Injures 8**
- Veteran Tennis Champion **Loses** to 19-Year-Old Star
- Cancer Study **Reveals** Surprising Results



Although all these events happened in the fairly recent past, in the headlines we describe them with the present tense.

Put it into practice!

Think about three recent events that have happened in your city / country. Write three "newspaper headlines" using the present simple tense.

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4. Using the present continuous when talking about an **EXTREMELY** frequent action

The beginning of this lesson said that we use the simple present for regular/frequent events, but that there is an exception involving the word "always."

When someone does an action so frequently that it is almost like a continuous characteristic of that person, we can use the present continuous with **always**, **continually**, or **constantly**. This structure is often used when we are annoyed with the frequent action:

- My sister's **constantly asking** me for money. It's such a pain!
- They're **always changing** their minds; they can't commit to anything.
- He has such a negative attitude. He's **continually complaining** about his job, his wife, his kids, his car, his neighborhood...



Put it into practice!

Think about someone you know who has an annoying habit, and make a sentence using the present continuous:

- He's / She's - always / continually / constantly - _____ing...

Summary:

- Use the simple present for things that are generally true or happen regularly
- Use the present continuous for actions that are happening now, or are temporary
- Do not use the present continuous with "state verbs" (ex. know, contain, belong)

- We generally do not use the present continuous with verbs that perform the action they refer to (ex. admit, confess, refuse) – although there are some exceptions
- Some verbs can be both state verbs and action verbs – and if they are action verbs then we can use them in the present continuous
- With some "mental state verbs" (think, realize, consider, regret) we can use them in present simple for certainty and present continuous if we are not yet sure – or if the thought is forming in that moment
- The simple present is often used in stories & newspaper headlines for dramatic effect
- The present continuous is often used with EXTREMELY frequent actions, with always / continually / constantly

Now take the quiz and do the practice exercises to help reinforce your knowledge of the present tenses!

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Writing Task

Describe your daily and weekly routines in detail. Talk about your activities, habits, hobbies, and what you're currently working on at your job or in other personal pursuits.

Practice Exercises

Simple Present or Present Continuous?

Circle the correct option.

1. **It rains / it's raining** very hard - maybe we shouldn't go out.
2. **I eat / I'm eating** lunch with my coworkers every day.
3. My son **hates / is hating** vegetables. He never eats them.
4. William's not home right now. **He travels / He's traveling**.
5. These shoes **don't fit / aren't fitting**. I need a larger size.
6. From the tone of her voice, **it sounds / it's sounding** like she's angry.
7. My sister **has / is having** long black hair.
8. **I usually go / I'm usually going** to the gym in the morning.
9. My car is being repaired, so **I rent / I'm renting** a car this week.
10. **I confess / I'm confessing** that I have a drinking problem.
11. I just finished the book. Now **I understand / I'm understanding** why everyone loves this author.
12. **They consider / They're considering** buying the house; they said they'll decide by the end of the week.
13. **We currently know / We're currently knowing** nothing about the matter.
14. **He approves / He's approving** of your idea.
15. I've done my part. Now **it depends / it's depending** on you.
16. **I have / I'm having** a headache, so **I have / I'm having** trouble concentrating today.

Always / Continually / Constantly + Present Continuous

Complete these sentences in the present continuous using the suggested words:

Example:

"My daughter can't go 5 minutes without her smart phone. **She's continually checking it.**" (*continually / check / it*)

1. "You're going too fast! Slow down!"

"Come on, Mom, _____!"
(*constantly / criticize / my driving*)

2. "Henry said he's not going to finish the work on time."

"_____."
(*always / miss / deadlines*)

3. "They've just gone to McDonald's for the 5th time this week."

"_____."
(*continually / eat / fast food*)

4. "I can't find my keys!"

"_____."
(*constantly / lose / things*)

5. "She wants us to look after her dog while she's on vacation."

"_____."
(*always / ask for / favors*)

Answers

1. **It's raining** very hard - maybe we shouldn't go out.
2. **I eat** lunch with my coworkers every day.
3. My son **hates** vegetables. He never eats them.
4. William's not home right now. **He's traveling**.
5. These shoes **don't fit**. I need a larger size.
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15. I've done my part. Now **it depends** on you.
16. **I have** a headache, so **I'm having** trouble concentrating today.

1. "You're going too fast! Slow down!"

"Come on, Mom, **you're constantly criticizing my driving!**"

2. "Henry said he's not going to finish the work on time."

He's always missing deadlines."

3. "They've just gone to McDonald's for the 5th time this week."

They're continually eating fast food."

4. "I can't find my keys!"

You're constantly losing things."

5. "She wants us to look after her dog while she's on vacation."

She's always asking for favors."