

Present time

Adapted from “First Certificate Language Practice” by Michael Vince

Explanations

Present simple

- **Facts which are always true**

The present simple is used to describe permanent facts, for example in science and geographical descriptions.

*The light from the Sun **takes** 8 minutes 20 seconds to reach the Earth. The River Po **flows** into the Adriatic Sea.*

The present simple is also used for situations that are generally true.

*I **work** in an office and **live** in a flat in the suburbs.*

- **Habitual actions**

The present simple is used to describe habits and routines. A frequency adverb is often used.

*I usually **take** the bus to work.*

- **Summary of events**

The present simple can be used to make a summary of the events in a narrative, for example in a film or book. It can also be used for a table of historical events.

*In Chapter 1, Susan meets David, and **agrees** to go to the school dance with him.*

*In 1789 the French Revolution **begins**.*

Present continuous

- **Actions which are in progress now**

The present continuous is used to describe actions which are temporary and not yet finished.

*I'm **doing** the washing-up.*

The action may be happening right now, or around now.

*I'm **reading** one of the Harry Potter books at the moment.*

- **Habits during a temporary situation**

The present continuous can describe a habit that happens over a short period of time. A time expression is necessary.

*At the moment we're **sending** all the mail by courier, because the Post Office is on strike.*

- **A repeated temporary action**

The present continuous can describe a single action that is repeated. A time expression is necessary.

*Whenever I see Tom he's **smoking**. You're **making** the same mistake again!*

In examples like this we are often exaggerating or complaining. This is particularly true when we use *always*.

*You're **always borrowing** money from me!*

Problems with simple and continuous

- Some verbs are not normally used in the continuous form, because they describe activities which already extend in time. These are called 'state' verbs.

be, believe, cost, depend, have, hear, know, matter, smell, suppose, taste, think, understand

- Some of these verbs can be used in continuous forms with a change of meaning.

Tim is being rather difficult at the moment. (behave)

I'm having breakfast. (eat)

I'm tasting the soup, to check if it needs more salt. (sample)

I'm thinking of buying a new car. (consider)

- In many situations we can use either a simple or continuous form. The simple form is for a permanent situation or general habit, the continuous form is for a temporary situation.

I live in London. (it's my permanent home)

I'm living in London. (just for a year - my home is in Athens)

Do you sleep a lot? (Is it your habit?)

Are you sleeping enough? (What is happening at the moment?)

Key points

- 1 The present simple describes facts and habitual actions. The present continuous describes actions which are still in progress at the time of speaking.
- 2 Many verbs which describe states rather than momentary events can only be used in the simple form. Many verbs describing mental activities (*understand, know*) are of this kind.
- 3 Some verbs have both state and event meanings, but the meanings are not the same.
- 4 When describing a photograph, we usually describe the scene as if it is happening now, and use the present continuous.
- 5 Present tense forms are also used to refer to future time. See Grammar 3.
- 6 Where some languages use present tenses, English uses the present perfect. See Grammar 2.

I've lived in Milan all my life.