

Past simple

English A2

What this topic teaches

The **past simple** talks about finished past events: things that started and ended, with a door closed behind them. – *I watched a film yesterday.*

- Regular verbs add **-ed**: *work* → *worked*, *play* → *played*.
- Irregular verbs change shape completely: *go* → *went*, *eat* → *ate*, *see* → *saw*.
- Chinese marks the past with a small word or a time word, and the verb itself never changes. English changes the verb every time – for every person, this time! *I walked, you walked, she walked.* For once, *he* gets nothing special.
- Memory hook: the past simple is a closed door. If the event is still connected to now, this is the wrong tense – that door belongs to the present perfect (topic 4).

Regular verbs: the -ed dances

Verb ending	The dance	Example
most verbs	add -ed	work → worked, watch → watched
ends in -e	add -d	like → liked, dance → danced
consonant + y	y → ied	study → studied, carry → carried
short vowel + consonant	double the consonant	stop → stopped, plan → planned

- The same panic-doubling as *running*: short stressed verbs double, long calm ones don't. *stop* → *stopped*, but *rain* → *rained*.
- The -ed has three pronunciations: /t/ *worked*, /d/ *played*, /ɪd/ *wanted*. Say *wanted* aloud: the extra beat is how you hear it.

Irregular verbs: the rebels

The commonest verbs in English are irregular. They went to the gym of history and came back changed.

Base	Past	Base	Past
go	went	eat	ate
see	saw	buy	bought
have	had	take	took
come	came	write	wrote
is/am	was	are	were

- There is no rule; there is a list. Learn ten a week and the list runs out in a month.
- △ *be* has two pasts: *was* for I/he/she/it, *were* for you/we/they. *I was tired. They were happy.* The shape-shifter keeps shape-shifting, even in the past.

Negatives and questions: did eats the past

Like *does* in the present simple, the past hires a helper: **did**.

	Form	Example
negative	didn't + base	I didn't watch the film.
question	Did + subject + base?	Did you watch the film?
short answer	Yes, I did. / No, I didn't.	–

- △ After *did/didn't*, the verb returns to base form: *Did you **go**?* – never “*Did you went?*” Memory hook: **did eats the past**. The helper family has a big appetite; *does* eats the -s, and *did* eats the -ed.
- △ But *was/were* need no helper – *be* flips alone, as always: *Were you tired?* ✓, “*Did you were tired?*” ×.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ **is not the past simple**. It marks a completed action, not a timeline. English chooses the tense by *time*, not by completion: *I **ate** breakfast at seven* (finished, past simple) vs *I **have eaten** breakfast* (connected to now, next topic). Different doors.
- △ **Double-marking**. “*Did you went?*” has two pasts. *did* already ate it: *Did you go?*
- △ **Forgetting to change the verb at all**. and differ only in the time word, so learners write “*I walk to school yesterday.*” In English the verb carries the past: *I **walked**.*
- △ **Signal words guard the door**: *yesterday, last week, in 2019, two days ago* all demand the past simple. See one, close the door.

Say it aloud

Tell a true story about yesterday. Three sentences minimum; drama optional.

- I woke up late. I ran to the bus stop. The bus left without me. The bus always knows.
- What did you eat for dinner? – I ate noodles. What did you eat? Tell the truth.
- I didn't do my homework yesterday because my dog looked at me. (Teachers have heard this one. It still doesn't work.)

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *I _____ (watch) a film yesterday.* – **watched**. Regular verb, *yesterday* closes the door.
2. *She _____ (go) to Beijing last week.* – **went**. A rebel verb; the list, not the rule.
3. *_____ you _____ (see) the game?* – **Did ... see**. *did* eats the past.
4. *They _____ (be) happy.* – **were**. *be* needs no helper, even in the past.
5. “*Did you went home?*” – $\times \rightarrow$ **Did you go home?** One past per sentence, and *did* already ate it.