

Present perfect vs past simple

English B1

What this topic teaches

You know both doors from A2: the past simple (closed door, named time) and the present perfect (open door, connected to now). B1 is where you stop knowing the rules and start *choosing* correctly under pressure. This topic is the full showdown .

- The one-question test: **Is the time finished and named?** Yes → past simple. No → present perfect.
- *I lost my keys yesterday.* (closed) vs *I have lost my keys.* (open: I can't get in now.)
- Memory hook: the past simple is a photograph – the moment is framed and over. The present perfect is a shadow – the event is behind you, but it still touches your feet.

The time words give the answer

Closed time (past simple)	Open time (present perfect)
yesterday, last night	today, tonight
last week, last year	this week, this year
in 2019, at seven o'clock	since 2019, for ten years
two days ago	ever, never, just, already, yet

- *I saw him **yesterday**.* The time word closes the door.
- *I have seen him **today**.* Today is still running; the door is open.
- △ *today* and *this week* are open only while they last. *I have had three coffees today* (said at noon) vs *I had three coffees today* (said at midnight, when today closed).

Experience or news vs the details

English has a rhythm here: the perfect opens a topic, the simple carries the details.

- *I **have been** to Chengdu.* (the experience – open door)
- *I **went** there in 2023. I **ate** hotpot every day.* (the details – closed doors)
- △ Never “*I have been there in 2023.*” The moment you name the time, the door closes and the perfect is illegal.
- News works the same way: *The head teacher **has announced** a holiday!* (fresh news) – *She **announced** it this morning.* (the detail).

The two questions that sound alike

Question	Meaning	Where is he?
How long did you live in Beijing?	that period is over	somewhere else now
How long have you lived in Beijing?	the period is still running	still there

- *I lived in Beijing for five years* = I don't live there now. *I have lived here for five years* = I still do.
- One letter of tense, a whole biography of difference. English speakers hear the answer to “where does he live now?” inside your tense choice.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- **△ marks completion, not time.** can become *I ate* or *I have eaten* – the Chinese doesn't decide; the English time context does. Ask: finished time? Closed door. Still relevant? Open door.
- **△ The yesterday assassin.** “*I have seen him yesterday*” is the single most common B1 error. *Yesterday* kills the perfect. Every time. No exceptions, no mercy.
- **△ News first, details after.** Don't report the news in the simple and then switch: “*He announced a holiday! We have cheered.*” × – news in the perfect, details in the simple.
- **△ Don't use the perfect for dead-and-buried times.** “*I have visited the museum in 2019.*” ×. In 2019 is a photograph, not a shadow.

Say it aloud

Play “open door, closed door” with a partner.

- I have finished my homework. (shadow: I am free now.) I finished it twenty minutes ago. (photograph.)
- Have you ever eaten durian ? – Yes, I have. I tried it in Malaysia and I have never fully recovered.
- We have had four English lessons this week. It is only Wednesday. Pray for us.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *I _____ (see) that film yesterday.* – **saw**. Named time, closed door.
2. *I _____ (lose) my keys! I can't get in.* – **have lost**. The shadow is on your feet right now.
3. *She has lived here _____ 2015.* – **since**. A start line; *for* would measure the length.
4. *How long did you live in Beijing?* means – **he has moved away**. The simple past buries the period.
5. *“Have you ever tried hotpot?”* – *“Yes, I _____ (try) it in Chengdu.”* – **tried**. The answer names the time, so the door closes.