

7.1.5 Past Perfect

Construction: The *grammatical construction* of *past perfect* tense is:

Had + past participle (refer to section 2.2.5 for *participles*)

For example: *had come, had done, had revealed, had studied* etc.

Past perfect tense should be used in the following scenarios:

1. **Scenario 1: An event that happened at some point “before” another event in the past** - This represents the most common scenario of *past perfect* tense. This is used to express the situation that an event happened at *some point* (expressed as *past perfect*) “before” *another event* (expressed as *simple past*, depicted by the *star* in the illustration below) in the past. It should be noted that the exact time of occurrence of the event is not important.



For example:

Michelle had already left for school by the time Peter came to pick her up.

- The event of Michelle leaving for school (expressed as *past perfect*) happened at *some time* “before” Peter came to pick her up (expressed as *simple past*).

James realized his mistake, but the damage had been done.

- The event of damage having been done (expressed as *past perfect*) happened at *some time* “before” James realized his mistake (expressed as *simple past*).

A sentence based on official question (#124, OG-13: *She was less successful after she had emigrated...*).

Less popular in the latter part of her career than she was in the initial years, Elizabeth Taylor was born in a northwestern suburb of London and went on to become one of the world's most famous film stars.

Analysis: As per the sentence, two different phases of Elizabeth Taylor’s life are being discussed: Latter part of her career and initial years. Hence the *earlier* of these two phases (*initial years*) should be in *past perfect* (she *had been*), and not in *simple past* (she *was*). So, the correct sentence is:

Less popular in the latter part of her career than she had been in the initial years, Elizabeth Taylor was born in a northwestern suburb of London and went on to become one of the world's most famous film stars.

Note:

- a) Past perfect is used in sentences which depict two events, and the event that happened *more* in the past is depicted in *past perfect*. In the example above (*James realized his mistake, but the damage had been done*), the two events are: *James realizing his mistake* and the *damage being done*. Out of these events, *damage being done* happened *more in the past* and is depicted in *past perfect* (*..but*

the damage had been done). For this reason, *past perfect* is also referred to as the tense that depicts *past of the past*: Two events happened in the past, but the event that happened in the *past of the past* is depicted in *past perfect*.

- b) As a corollary, in a sentence that uses *past perfect*, the event that is expressed in *past perfect* happened *first*, while the event that is expressed in *simple past* happened *later*. So, *past perfect* is used to establish a *chronological sequence* among two past events. However, in situations in which the chronological sequence is *very evident* (for example, by using *specific times*), the usage of *past perfect* should be *avoided*. For example: *Tony came to office at 9:00 am and finished his work by 5:00 pm*. In this sentence, the usage of specific times (9:00 am and 5:00 pm) make the sequence of these two past events very evident; hence this entire sentence is in *simple past*, and *past perfect* would be an *incorrect* usage in this sentence.
- c) Notice the commonality between *present perfect* and *past perfect*. In *present perfect*, an event happened at some unspecific time before *now*; in *past perfect*, an event happened at some unspecific time before *another event* in the past.

2. **Scenario 2: An extended event that continued until another event happened in the past** - This is used to express the situation that an event happened for a longer duration in the past (expressed as *past perfect*) until *another event* (expressed as *simple past*, depicted by the star in the illustration below) in the past.



For example:

Peter did not qualify in the exam, because he had not studied for the entire year.

- The event of Peter *not studying* happened for a *longer* duration (*entire year* in this case) in the past (expressed as *past perfect*: *had not studied*) until *another event* (depicted as star in the above picture, and expressed as *simple past*: *did not qualify*) in the past.

His parents were not surprised at this success, because they had always believed in him.

- The event of his parents believing in him happened for a *longer* duration (*always* in this case) in the past (expressed as *past perfect*: *had always believed*) until *another event* (depicted as star in the above picture, and expressed as *simple past*: *were not surprised*) in the past.

A sentence based on official question (#37, OG-13: *Some buildings that were destroyed...*):

The "Rana Plaza" in Bangladesh that collapsed, resulting in heavy casualties, was constructed with poor building material.

Analysis: As per the sentence, two different aspects of the building “Rana Plaza” are being discussed: It collapsed resulting in heavy casualties and it was constructed with poor building material. Hence the *earlier* of these two phases (*constructed with poor building material*) should be in *past perfect* (she *had been*), and not in *simple past* (she *constructed*). So, the correct sentence is:

The "Rana Plaza" in Bangladesh that collapsed, resulting in heavy casualties, had been constructed with poor building material.

Another sentence based on GMATPrep question (*In 1981 children in the United States spent an average of ...*):

In 2007, a typical web user spent less than 4 hours a month on Facebook; by 2011, that figure went up to 8 hours.

Analysis: There are actually 3 events that this sentence talks about:

(a) The time that a typical web user spent on Facebook in 2007

(b) 4 years passing since then (between 2007 and 2011)

(c) But, *before* those 4 years passed (*within those years*, as indicated by the words *by 2011*), that figure (the *time* that a typical web user spent on Facebook) went up to 8 hours.

However, note that (c) happened *before* (b) and hence, (c) should be in *past perfect* (in this case: *had gone up*). It should also be noted that *in 2007* is a *specific time*, and so, *a typical web user spent less than 4 hours a month on Facebook* is correctly expressed in *simple past* (remember that *simple past* is used to express the situation that an event started and finished *at a specific time* in the past); on the other hand, *by 2011* is an *unspecified time* because this could refer to *any time* in or before 2011), and so, a *perfect tense* (*past perfect* in this case) would correctly depict this situation. So, the correct sentence is:

In 2007, a typical web user spent less than 4 hours a month on Facebook; by 2011, that figure had gone up to 8 hours.

3. Scenario 3: In a subordinate clause after “if”, “would have” should be avoided; instead, *past perfect* should be used.

For example:

Incorrect: *If Jack would have been in the audience, I would have seen him.*

-The subordinate clause after the *if* clause uses *would have*. This is incorrect.

Correct: *If the opponent had played fair, we might have won.*

-The subordinate clause after the *if* clause uses Past Perfect *had played*. This is correct.