

7.4. Advanced topics in tenses

7.4.1 Infinitives and tenses

In section 2.2.4 (*Verbals: The “Verb forms” that are not Verbs*), we briefly noted that *infinitives* are *verbals*. From a tense (*time sequence*) point of view, we cover two prominent types of infinitives in this section: *simple infinitive* and *perfect infinitive*.

Simple Infinitive

This is the most *commonly* used type of infinitive and has the following structure: *to + the basic form of the verb*. Examples of simple infinitive: *to go* (*to + basic verb form go*), *to run* (*to + basic verb form run*), *to sing* (*to + basic verb form sing*) etc.

Tense in *simple infinitive* usage: The *simple infinitive* does *not* have a tense of its own; it just derives its tense from the *main verb* of the sentence. For example:

James loves to play.

James loved to play.

While both sentences use the same infinitive *to play*, the first sentence is in *simple present*, the second sentence is in *simple past*. So, the *simple infinitive* in these sentences (*to play*) does not in any way *influence* the tense in these sentences.

Perfect Infinitive

The *perfect infinitive* has the following structure:

to + have + past participle

Examples of perfect infinitive: *to have called* (*to + have + past participle called*), *to have warned* (*to + have + past participle warned*), *to have taken* (*to + have + past participle taken*) etc.

The perfect infinitive always indicates that its action happened *before* the action of the main verb of the clause. Hence perfect infinitives can act as *present perfect*, *past perfect*, or (in some rare cases) *simple past tense*, as indicated in the following examples:

Michael is said to have completed the work.

- *to have completed* is *perfect infinitive*. In this sentence, the main verb is *is*, a *simple present* verb. As discussed above, the perfect infinitive always indicates that its action happened *before* the action of the *main verb* of the clause. Hence, in this sentence, perfect infinitive indicates that its action happened at some point of time *before* present. Recall that *present perfect* tense (section 7.1.4) depicts an action that happened at some point of time *before* present. So, the event that happened *before* present (in this case, the event of *completing the work*) is *present perfect*. Hence in this sentence, the *perfect infinitive* acts as *present perfect* as indicated in the picture below.



Many people were believed to have died in the air crash.

- *to have died* is *perfect infinitive*. The main verb in this sentence is *were*, a *simple past* verb. As discussed above, the perfect infinitive always indicates that its action happened *before* the action of the *main verb* of the clause. Hence, in this sentence, perfect infinitive indicates that its action happened at some point of time *before* another event in the past. Recall that *past perfect* tense (section 7.1.5) depicts an action that happened at some point of time *before* another event in the past. So, the event that happened *earlier* (in this case, the event of *dying*) is *past perfect*. Hence, in this sentence, *perfect infinitive* acts as *past perfect* in this sentence, as indicated in the picture below.



Let's look at examples based on official sources.

A sentence based on official question (# 76, OG-13: *Combining enormous physical strength with higher intelligence...*):

Farmers in Neolithic era appear to adopt permanent settlement for the first time in human history.

Analysis: This sentence uses *simple infinitive* (*to adopt*), and hence, the infinitive (*simple infinitive*) just derives its tense from the *main verb* of the sentence (in this case the *simple present*: *appear*). So, in this case, the simple infinitive *to adopt* illogically indicates that farmers *still appear* this way! We fix this sentence by using the *perfect infinitive* (*to have adopted*).

Farmers in Neolithic era appear to have adopted permanent settlement for the first time in human history.

So, now the action in *perfect infinitive* (the act of adopting permanent settlement) happened *before* the action of the main verb in its clause (in this case, the main verb *appear* is clearly *simple present*). Hence, *perfect infinitive* acts as *simple past* in the correct sentence, appropriately suggesting that the act of adopting permanent settlement happened in the *past*.