

Describing events in the past

- **Main events**
The past simple is used to describe finished actions and events in the past.
Susan went into the station and bought a ticket.
- **Background description**
The past continuous is used to describe actions in progress in the past. It gives information about the background situation.
There were a lot of people waiting in the station. Some were sleeping on the benches, and others were walking up and down. Susan was looking for Graham, so she didn't sit down.
- **Past before past**
The past perfect is used to make it clear that one past event happens before another past event. We use the past perfect for the earlier event.
By the time the train arrived, Susan had managed to push her way to the front of the crowd.
It is not always necessary to use the past perfect if a time expression makes the order of events clear.
Before the train arrived, Susan managed to push her way to the front of the crowd.
- **Past continuous used with past simple**
We often use the past continuous first to set the scene, and then the past simple for the separate, completed actions that happen.
Susan was looking for Graham, so she didn't sit down. Instead, she tried calling him on her mobile phone.
We often contrast an action in progress with a sudden event which interrupts it.
While Susan was trying to get onto the platform, a man grabbed her handbag.
- **Participle clauses**
Participle clauses are introduced by the time expressions *before*, *after* and *while*. They have the same subject as the following clause.
After struggling with him, Susan pulled the bag from his hands.

Habits in the past

- **Past simple**
The past simple is used to describe past habits or states. A time expression is usually necessary.
I always got up at six in those days. (habit)
I lived in Austria for several years. (state)

- **Used to**
Used to is used to describe past habits or states. A time expression is not necessary.

I used to get up at six, but now I get up at eight.

I used to own a horse. (I owned a horse once.)

With negatives and questions *used to* becomes *use to*.

I didn't use to like beer.

Did you use to swim every day?

When we use *used to* we suggest that the action is no longer true and so make a strong contrast with the present.

- **Would**
Would is used to describe a person's typical activities in the past. It can only be used to describe repeated actions, not states. It is mainly used in writing, and in personal reminiscences.

Every evening was the same. Jack would turn on the radio, light his pipe and fall asleep.

- **Past continuous**
The past continuous can be used to describe a repeated action in the past, often an annoying habit. A frequency adverb is necessary.

When Peter was younger, he was always getting into trouble.

We can use the past continuous with *think*, *hope* and *wonder* to give a polite or uncertain meaning.

I was thinking of having a party next week.

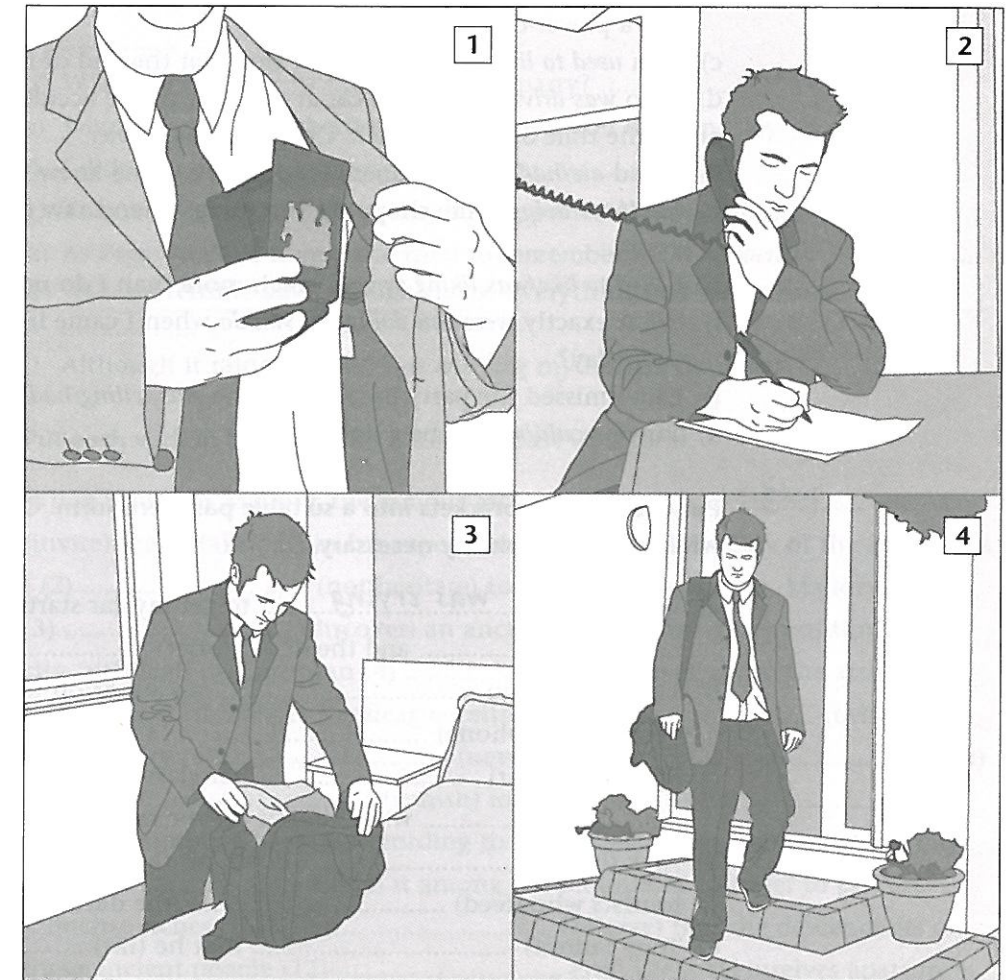
I was hoping you would join us at the café tonight.

I was wondering if you could help me.

Politeness and uncertainty

Practice

- 1 Choose a suitable description for each picture.



- a) When he left the house, Peter forgot that he had put his passport and wallet in his other jacket.
- b) After phoning the airport, Peter packed his suitcase.
- c) When he returned from Portugal in March, Peter put his passport and wallet in his jacket pocket.
- d) A few days before leaving for his summer holiday, Peter phoned the airport to check his flight.
- e) While Peter was packing his suitcase, he realised that he hadn't checked his flight.
- f) While Peter was packing his suitcase, the phone rang.

2 Underline the most suitable verb form in each sentence. The first one is done for you.

- a) I suddenly remembered that I *forgot/had forgotten* my keys.
- b) While Diana *watched/was watching* her favourite television programme, there was a power-cut.
- c) Tom *used to live/would live* in the house at the end of the street.
- d) Who *was driving/drove* the car at the time of the accident?
- e) By the time Sheila got back, Chris *went/had gone*.
- f) David *ate/had eaten* Japanese food before, so he knew what to order.
- g) I *did/was doing* some shopping yesterday, when I saw that Dutch friend of yours.
- h) I *used to like/was liking* sweets much more than I do now.
- i) What exactly *were you doing/did you do* when I came into your office yesterday?
- j) Laura missed the party because no-one *was telling/had told* her about it.
- k) Tanya *would/used to* be a doctor.

3 Put each verb in brackets into a suitable past verb form. Only use the past perfect where this is absolutely necessary.

- a) While I (try) *was trying* to get my car started, a passing car (stop) and the driver (offer) to help me.
- b) The police (pay) no attention to Clare's complaint because she (phone) them so many times before.
- c) Mary (not wear) her glasses at the time, so she (not notice) what kind of car the man (drive)
- d) Nick (lie) down on the grass for a while, next to some tourists who (feed) the ducks.
- e) Tony (admit) that he (hit) the other car, but said that he (not damage) it.
- f) Sorry, I (not listen) to you. I (think) about something else.
- g) Helen (feel) very tired, and when she (finish) her work, she (fall) asleep.
- h) The police (get) to Clare's house as fast as they could, but the burglars (disappear)
- i) I (phone) you last night but you (not answer) What (you do) ?
- j) We (not go) out yesterday because it (rain)

4 Decide whether the verb form in *italics* is suitable or unsuitable.

- a) While I *had* a bath, someone knocked on the door. *unsuitable*
- b) Sally *didn't go* to a boxing match before.
- c) Harry tried to repair the car, but he didn't really know what he *was doing*.
- d) What *did you wear* to the Ponsonby's party?
- e) *Were you eating* spaghetti every day when you lived in Italy?
- f) I didn't know you *had bought* a new car.
- g) They all wanted to believe her, but suspected she *was lying*.
- h) As Peggy walked home, she tried to remember what *happened*.
- i) 'What a terrible day!' thought Lucy. Everything *had gone* wrong!
- j) Although it rained a lot, I *was enjoying* my holiday last year.

5 Put each verb in brackets into a suitable past verb form.

When Professor Mallory, the famous archaeologist, (1) *invited* (invite) me to take part in his expedition to find the Lost City of the Himalayas, I (2) (not hesitate) to accept his invitation. Mallory (3) (discover) an ancient map showing the position of the city, although no European (4) (ever go) to the area before. In fact, most of Mallory's colleagues either (5) (believe) that the city (6) (never exist) or (7) (feel) that it (8) (vanish) long ago and (9) (become) simply a legend. According to the Professor, the builders of the city (10) (hide) it among the mountains in order to protect its immense riches. He (11) (believe) that the descendants of these ancient people (12) (still keep) themselves apart from the rest of mankind for the very same reasons. So when we (13) (set off) on a cool May morning towards the distant mountains, each of us (14) (look forward) to exciting discoveries. For a week or more we (15) (climb) higher and higher, following the map, which Mallory (16) (study) from time to time. Then one afternoon, while we (17) (rest) at the top of a valley, we (18) (notice) that a rider on a horse (19) (wave) at us from the other side of the valley. A rider whose clothes (20) (shine) like gold!

6 Rewrite each sentence beginning as shown. Use a participle clause.

- a) Norman collected the parcel, but then he realised it was the wrong one.
After *collecting the parcel, Norman realised it was the wrong one.*.....
- b) Sue left the house but first she checked that she had her keys.
Before
- c) Mark was parking his car when he noticed the wing-mirror was broken.
While
- d) Julia cleaned the house, but then she fell asleep on the sofa.
After
- e) Brian bought a new television, but first he checked all the prices.
Before
- f) Alan was skiing in Switzerland and met his old friend, Ken.
While
- g) Kate took two aspirins, and then she felt a lot better.
After
- h) Sheila went out for the evening, but first she washed her hair.
Before

Key points

- 1 The past simple describes completed events in the past, such as the main events in a narrative. It can also describe habits and routines in the past.
- 2 The past continuous is used for:
 - a) background description.
 - b) actions in progress, often contrasted with a sudden event.
 The past continuous cannot be used to describe past routines and habits.
- 3 Participle clauses can introduce a clause giving the main event. The subjects of both clauses must be the same.
- 4 The past perfect describes a past event which took place before another past event. If *before* or *after* is used, the past perfect is optional. The past perfect is not used for an event that happened a long time ago in the past.
- 5 *Used to* only refers to past time, and has no present form.
- 6 *Would* can be used to describe habitual actions in the past, usually in writing. It does not make such a strong contrast with the present as *used to*. Compare:
 - Jim would always make his mother a cup of tea after lunch.*
 - Jim used to drink tea, but now he prefers coffee.**Would* cannot be used to describe states.
 - Sally used to be a dancer.*

→ SEE ALSO

Grammar 2: Present perfect
Grammar 5: Consolidation 1
Grammar 7 and 8: Conditionals, Wishes and related forms
Grammar 14: Time expressions

Explanations

Recent events

Present perfect simple

The present perfect simple is used to describe recent events.

I've left my shopping bag behind.

The event happened in the past, but there is a result in the present.

I've broken my arm, as you can see.

No definite time is given for the event, but to emphasise the idea of recentness we can use *just*.

I've just broken my watch.

We can also describe events that have not happened.

I haven't found her phone number yet.

Indefinite events

■ Present perfect simple

No definite time is given for the events. They are a series of actions in our life up to now.

I've been to France three times.

After *It's/This is the first/second time* we use the present perfect. It also refers to our life up to now.

This is the first time I have eaten Japanese food.

■ Compared with past simple

Events described using the past simple have definite times.

I went to France last year.

I ate at a Japanese restaurant on Saturday.

If we think of a definite place for an event, this may suggest a definite time.

I left my shopping bag on the train.

Extended or repeated events

■ Present perfect simple

The present perfect simple describes a state which lasts up to the present.

I've lived in this house for five years.

The present perfect simple can describe a habitual action in a period of time up to the present.

I've never worn a tie to work, and I refuse to start now!

■ Present perfect continuous

The present perfect continuous can also describe a state which lasts up to the present moment.

I've been living in this house for five years.

There is little difference in meaning between simple and continuous in this case, or with *How long* questions.

How long have you lived/been living in this house?

The verbs *wait, sit, lie, stay* prefer the present perfect continuous.

I've been waiting for ages.

For, since, ago

See Grammar 14 for contrast between these time expressions.

Present perfect simple or continuous?

■ Completed action

The present perfect simple can show that an action is complete.

I've finished my homework!

If we say *how many* or *how much* we use the simple form. A certain amount has been completed.

I've written ten pages of my homework!

■ Not completed

The present perfect continuous can show that an action is not completed, or that it has finished recently.

We've been walking for hours! Let's have a rest.

I've been digging the garden. That's why I'm so dirty!

■ Present result or action in progress

We use the present perfect simple if our attention is on the present result.

I've written my homework. Now I can watch the television.

We use the present perfect continuous if our attention is on the action in progress.

I've been writing my homework all evening! I didn't know it would take so long.

Practice

1 Choose a suitable description for each picture.

a)



- 1) Did you enjoy the match?
- 2) Have you enjoyed the match?

b)



- 1) What have you been doing?
- 2) What have you done?

c)



- 1) He was married six times.
- 2) He has been married six times.

d)



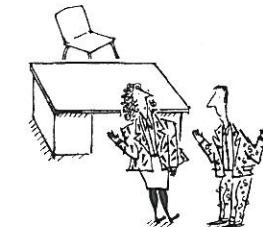
- 1) How long have you been here?
- 2) How long are you here for?

e)



- 1) I've been waiting for two hours.
- 2) I waited for two hours.

f)



- 1) Where did Wendy go?
- 2) Where has Wendy been?

2 Underline the most suitable verb form in each sentence.

- a) *Did you see/Have you seen* my bag anywhere? I can't find it.
- b) Larry *is writing/has been writing/has written* his novel for the last two years.
- c) From the minute he got up this morning Gary *asked/has asked/has been asking* silly questions!
- d) *Have you given/Did you give* Helen my message when you *have seen/saw* her?
- e) Sorry, could you say that again? I *didn't listen/haven't listened/haven't been listening* to you.
- f) The police think that they *found/have found* your wallet, so call this number.
- g) *Did you two meet/Have you two met* before? Eric, this is Amanda.
- h) *Did you meet/Have you met* anyone interesting at the reception?

3 Put each verb in brackets into a suitable verb form.

- a) I'm sorry about not coming last week. I (have) *had* a cold and so I (stay) at home.
- b) Wait a minute! I (have) an idea. Let's go and see Roger. We last (see) him a long time ago.
- c) It's nice to be back here in London. This is the second time I (come) here.
- d) I'm phoning about your bicycle for sale, which I (see) in the local paper. (you sell) it? Or is it still available?
- e) This place is in a terrible mess! What on earth (you do) ?
- f) And now for an item of local news. Hampshire police (find) the dangerous snake which (go) missing earlier in the week.
- g) This tooth (kill) me lately! So I (make) an appointment with the dentist for next Tuesday.
- h) I can't give you the report I (promise) for today because I (not finish) it.

4 Underline the most suitable time expression.

- a) I haven't seen Gerry *for/since* a long time. How is he?
- b) It's ages *ago/since* I last went to a football match.
- c) I've written to Deborah *last week/recently*.
- d) What have you been doing *today/yesterday*?
- e) Have you eaten Italian food *before/already*?
- f) I've been living here *in/since* the end of last year.
- g) Actually I had dinner with Sue *last night/lately*.
- h) I've been trying to get in touch with David *for ages/for the last time*.
- i) Terry hasn't been to Edinburgh *since/when* we went there together.
- j) I can't remember *how long/when* I've had this watch.

5 Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word given. Do not change the word given. You must use between two and five words, including the word given.

- a) Steve started learning the violin a month ago.
learning
Steve *has been learning* the violin for a month.
- b) I haven't been to an Indian restaurant for ages.
since
It's ages an Indian restaurant.
- c) When she heard the results, Mary began to feel more confident.
become
Since hearing the results more confident.
- d) The last time Nancy came here was in 1986.
since
Nancy hasn't 1986.
- e) This is my first visit to Japan.
time
This is the first to Japan.
- f) How long have Helen and Robert been married?
get
When married?
- g) Jack bought those trousers last month, and has been wearing them ever since.
for
Jack has a month.
- h) It's a long time since our last conversation.
spoken
We long time.
- i) Thanks, but I had something to eat earlier.
already
Thanks, but I've eat.
- j) This is my first game of water-polo.
played
I before.

6 Put each verb in brackets into either the present perfect simple or the present perfect continuous.

- a) Someone (eat) *has eaten* all the cakes. I'll have to buy some more.
- b) What (you buy) your sister for her birthday?
- c) My throat is really sore. I (sing) all evening.
- d) Brenda (learn) Russian, but she finds it difficult.
- e) How many people (you invite) to your party?
- f) Those two cats (sit) on that branch for the last hour.
- g) It (rain) all day! Why can't it stop?
- h) Diana (wear) twelve different dresses in the past week!
- i) I (do) everything you asked. What should I do now?
- j) Graham and Pauline (try) to find a house for ages, but they can't find one they can afford.

7 Put each verb in brackets into either the past simple, the present perfect simple, or the present perfect continuous.

It was announced in London this morning that the British Oil Corporation (1) *has discovered* (discover) oil under the sea near the Welsh coast. The company, which (2) (drill) for oil in the area since 2001, (3) (find) small amounts of oil near Swansea last month, and since then (4) (discover) larger amounts under the seabed nearby. Last year the government (5) (lend) over £50,000,000 to BOC, and (6) (give) permission for the company to build an oil refinery and other facilities in South Wales.

The reaction of local people to today's news (7) (be) mixed so far. Local MPs (8) (already welcome) the news, pointing out that the oil industry will bring badly needed jobs to the area. But local residents are worried about the danger of pollution. 'Nobody (9) (ask) us yet what we want,' said Ann Griffiths, leader of the Keep Out The Oil Campaign. 'Look what (10) (happen) when they (11) (find) oil in Scotland in the 1960s. The oil companies (12) (get) rich, not the local people. BOC (13) (not tell) us the truth about what this is going to mean for our people.' A BOC spokesman later (14) (refuse) to comment. Meanwhile local campaigners (15) (ask) the government to hold an inquiry.

8 Look carefully at each line. Some of the lines are correct, and some have a word which should not be there. Tick each correct line. If a line has a word which should not be there, write the word in the space.

A letter from the builders

Dear Mrs Sangster,

Just a quick note to explain what we have been done so far this month. The work on the kitchen has gone well so far, although we haven't already finished knocking down the outside wall yet. So I wrote to you last week and have explained that two of my workmen were ill. They have quite recovered now, I am glad to say, and they have come back to work yesterday. As the weather has been bad we have been work inside most of the time, and all the painting is now been finished. We have also put in a new window in the kitchen, as you have instructed in your last letter. As you have not been visiting here for two weeks we have not had the chance to discuss the walls. When we checked them we have discovered that they are in a dangerous condition. I'll let you know what we have do to them.

Best wishes,

Andrew Turner, Builder

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Key points

- 1 The present perfect simple describes events without a definite time. Either these events take place in a period of time leading up to the present moment, or the result of the event is still evident.
The choice between the present perfect simple and the past simple can depend on how the speaker thinks. Compare:
A: *What's the matter?* A: *What's the matter?*
B: *I've had an accident.* B: *I had an accident.*
In the second example, the speaker thinks of the event as finished rather than still connected with the present.
- 2 Events described with the present perfect simple may be recent, or not.
- 3 The present perfect continuous is used for an action in progress. It suggests that the action is unfinished, or recently finished. Compare:
I've read this book. (completion of the action is emphasised)
I've been reading this book. (the action itself is emphasised – it may not be complete)
- The present perfect continuous can also emphasise the length of time of the action.
- 4 *For* refers to a finished or unfinished period of time.
I waited for three hours.
He's been sitting there for ages.
Since refers to the point at which an unfinished period of time began.
He's been sitting there since two o'clock.
Ago refers to the time of a finished event.
Jill arrived a week ago.

→ SEE ALSO

Grammar 1: Past time
Grammar 5: Consolidation 1
Grammar 14: Time expressions

Explanations

Prediction

■ Will

Will is used to make predictions. It is often preceded by *I think* or by opinion words like *perhaps*. A time expression is also necessary.

I think it'll rain tomorrow. Perhaps she'll be late.

In speech, *will* is contracted to *'ll*.

See also Grammar 18 and 19 for functional uses of *will*.

■ Going to

Going to is also used for predictions. It is especially common when we can see the cause of the event.

Look out! There's a bus coming! It's going to hit us!

I can see you're going to have a baby. When is it due?

You're going to fall!

Going to is also common in impersonal statements.

Liverpool are going to win the Cup.

But *will* can also be used for most examples like this, with no change of meaning.

■ Future continuous

The future continuous is used to describe a situation in progress at a particular time in the future.

This time next week I expect I'll be living in London. And I'll probably be cycling to work.

■ Future perfect

The future perfect looks back from a point in the future.

By the time we get there, the film will have started.

It refers to indefinite time up to that point. This means that when we get to the future point we can say:

The film has started.

Intention

■ Going to

Going to is used to describe a present intention or plan. This is something we have already decided to do.

I'm going to fix the television tomorrow.

■ Will

Will is used for instant decisions made at the time of speaking.

I know, I'll get him a wallet for his birthday.

Fixed arrangements and timetables

- Present continuous
The present continuous is used to describe definite, fixed arrangements.
Sorry, I can't help you, I'm leaving in the morning.
The arrangements are often social arrangements or appointments and may be written in a diary.

- Present simple
The present simple is used to describe future events which are based on a timetable, programme or calendar.
My train leaves at 11.30 tomorrow morning.

When, until, as soon as

After the time expressions *when, until* and *as soon as* a present tense form is used, although this refers to future time.

I'll wait for you here until you get back.

The present perfect is often used in cases like this to emphasize the completion of an event.

I'll wait here until you have finished.

Practice

1 Underline the most suitable future form in each sentence.

- a) Why are you going to buy/will you buy a new mountain bike?
- b) Don't phone between 8.00 and 9.00. I'll study/I'll be studying then.
- c) Look out! That tree will/is going to fall!
- d) Let me know as soon as Louise will get/gets there.
- e) Great news! Jean and Chris will come/are coming to stay with us.
- f) According to this timetable, the bus is going to arrive/arrives at 6.00.
- g) Can you call me at 7.00, because I'll leave/I'm leaving tomorrow.
- h) If you arrive late at the sale, the best things will go/will have gone.

2 Put each verb in brackets into a suitable future form. More than one answer may be possible.

- a) I can't see you on Thursday afternoon. I (visit) am visiting our Birmingham branch.
- b) George (not be) back until six. Can I take a message?
- c) What (you buy) with the money you won in the lottery?
- d) I don't think you (have) any problems at the airport.
- e) (you take) your dog with you to Scotland?
- f) All the hotels are full. Where (we spend) the night?
- g) You'd better not come in July. My mother (stay) with me then.
- h) What time (your plane leave) ?

3 Put each verb in brackets into a suitable future form. More than one answer may be possible.

- a) By the time we reach home, the rain (stop) will have stopped.
- b) This time next week I (lie) on the beach in Spain.
- c) In ten years' time I (work) for a different company.
- d) If we don't get there by 6.00, Jack (leave)
- e) In July they (be married) for twenty years.
- f) In the year 2500 a lot of people (live) on the Moon.
- g) When you get to the station, I (wait) for you outside.
- h) Don't worry! The plane (land) in a moment.
- i) By the time you come home, I (finish) the decorating.
- j) Come round between eight and nine. We (watch) the match on television then.

4 Put each verb in brackets into a suitable future form.



Have you ever wondered what exactly (1) *you will be doing* (you do) in ten years time? Well, according to computer expert Tom Vincent, computers (2) (soon be able) to make accurate predictions about the future. Professor Vincent, from Cambridge, (3) (hold) a press conference next week to describe the computer which he calls 'Computafuture'. 'This computer can tell us what life (4) (be) like, based on data describing past events,' explains Professor Vincent. For example, Computafuture can predict how many people (5) (live) in a particular area, or whether there (6) (be) a lot of rain during a particular period. Professor Vincent also believes that by the year 2050, computers (7) (replace) teachers, and (8) (also do) most of the jobs now being done by the police. 'Computers are becoming more intelligent all the time,' says Professor Vincent. 'Soon they (9) (direct) traffic and (10) (teach) our children. And telling us about the future.'

5 Put each verb in brackets into a suitable verb form. All sentences refer to future time.

- a) When I (see) *see* you tomorrow, I (tell) you my news.
- b) As soon as we (get) there, we (phone) for a taxi.
- c) I (go) to the library before I (do) the shopping.
- d) We (wait) here until the rain (stop)
- e) I (get) £50 from the bank when it (open)
- f) After you (take) the medicine, you (feel) better.
- g) You have to stay until you (finish) your work.
- h) I (let) you know the minute I (hear) the results.
- i) Before we (paint) the wall, we (have) a cup of tea.
- j) We (climb) over the wall as soon as it (get) dark.

6 Look carefully at each line. Some of the lines are correct, and some have a word which should not be there. Tick each correct line. If a line has a word which should not be there, write the word in the space.

Keeping a diary

Are you one of those people who will know exactly what they will be doing every day next week? When the different days will arrive, will you have get out your diary, or are you the kind of person who will just guess? Some people will write their appointments in a diary, but others just hope that they will remember. For example, tonight I'm be going to the cinema, but perhaps I'll not forget all about it. You see, I will never keep a diary. I try not to forget my appointments, but I know that I will usually do. I just don't like planning my future. I know that one day I'm going to make a serious mistake. I'll be miss an important examination, or by the time I remember it and get there, it will have been finished. Perhaps that will be when I have finally buy a diary.

- *will*
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Key points

- 1 For functional uses of *will*, see Grammar 18 and 19.
- 2 The present continuous is used to describe fixed arrangements, and to ask about social arrangements.
Are you doing anything this evening?
- 3 The present simple and present perfect can be used to refer to future time after the words *when*, *until* and *as soon as*.
I'll tell you the news when I see you.
Call me when you have finished.

SEE ALSO

Grammar 5: Consolidation 1
Grammar 14: Time expressions
Grammar 18 and 19:
Functional uses of *will*