

# By vs until: deadline or duration

CEFR B1 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

By names the latest moment for a finished action. Until names the end of a continuing situation. The verb decides which one you need.

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## The rule

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### By: the deadline

- By means not later than: "Send the invoice by Monday." Monday is the last acceptable moment.
- By works with a finished action: finish, send, return, pay, decide, arrive.
- By is common with the future perfect: "By Friday, I will have finished the report."
- By the time adds a clause: "By the time we arrived, the film had started."

### Until: the end of a period

- Until means up to a point in time and then the situation changes or stops: "The shop is open until nine."
- Until works with continuing states and activities: wait, stay, sleep, work, be open, keep going.
- Not until marks the moment something starts: "I did not sleep until midnight."
- Till is a less formal way to write until, and both have the same meaning.

### The verb test

- Ask whether the verb describes a moment or a stretch of time.
- A moment of completion takes by: "I will pay by Friday."
- A stretch that continues takes until: "I will keep the money until Friday."
- If both seem possible, the sentence meaning changes: by Friday means the payment is done; until Friday means the money stays with you.

### By, until and negatives

- Not until means "only at that moment": "She did not arrive until ten."
- Not by does not form this pattern. Use not until or not before.
- By now means "already, or expected before this moment": "They should be here by now."
- Until now describes a period that has just ended: "Until now, I never understood the rule."

### From, to and other pairs

- From and until show a range with a clear end: "The course runs from March until June."
- From and to do the same job, and to sounds more natural with timetables: "from nine to five".
- By can also mean "beside" or "by means of", but the deadline meaning is the one that contrasts with until.
- In negative sentences about waiting or starting, until is almost always the right choice.

## Questions

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Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. Please send the money \_\_\_ Monday at the latest.

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2. The pool is open \_\_\_ nine every evening.

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3. I will finish the book \_\_\_ Friday.

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4. We waited \_\_\_ the bus arrived.

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5. She had already left \_\_\_ the time I called.

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6. He did not wake up \_\_\_ noon.

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7. I will keep the ticket \_\_\_ the end of the month.

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8. Can you be home \_\_\_ six?

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9. They should have called \_\_\_ now.

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10. \_\_\_ last summer, I had never seen the sea.

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11. The course runs from April \_\_\_ July.

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12. I will have packed my bags \_\_\_ the taxi arrives.

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13. He stayed at his desk \_\_\_ midnight.

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14. Please decide \_\_\_ tomorrow morning.

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15. She worked at the cafe \_\_\_ she finished university.

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16. We did not leave the house \_\_\_ the rain stopped.

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17. Apply \_\_\_ 30 June and start in September.

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18. The shop stays busy \_\_\_ late every Friday.

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19. Have you finished the exercise \_\_\_ now?

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20. I knew nothing about the plan \_\_\_ yesterday.

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## Answer key

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1. **by** — By sets a deadline: the money is sent not later than Monday.
2. **until** — The open state continues up to nine, so until fits the period.
3. **by** — Finishing is a completed action with a deadline, so by is correct.
4. **until** — Waiting continues up to the moment the bus arrives, so until fits.
5. **by** — By the time marks a deadline before another past event.
6. **until** — Not until marks the moment the action finally started.
7. **until** — Keeping the ticket is a continuing state, so it takes until.
8. **by** — Being home at a latest moment is a deadline, so by is needed.
9. **by** — By now expects a completed action at or before this moment.
10. **Until** — Until last summer describes the period before the change happened.
11. **until** — From and until show the range of a continuing course.
12. **by** — By the time sets a deadline before the taxi arrives.
13. **until** — Staying is a continuing action, so it takes until.
14. **by** — Deciding is a completed action with a deadline, so by is correct.
15. **until** — The work continued up to the moment she finished, so until fits.
16. **until** — Not until marks the moment the leaving happened.
17. **by** — The application deadline means the action happens not later than 30 June.
18. **until** — Staying busy is a continuing state, so until describes the period.
19. **by** — By now asks whether the action is complete at this moment.
20. **until** — Until yesterday describes the period before the news arrived.