

Past perfect vs past simple: which came first

CEFR B1-B2 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

When one past event happens before another, the earlier event takes had plus the past participle. The later event stays in the past simple.

The rule

The two-event pattern

- Past perfect: the earlier action: "She had left before I called."
- Past simple: the later action: "I called, but she had left."
- The order in the sentence can change; the tense shows the real timeline.
- Use the past perfect only when the earlier event matters for the story.

Time words that trigger the past perfect

- Before and after often pair the two tenses: "After she had eaten, she left."
- By the time introduces the later event: "By the time we arrived, the shop had closed."
- Already, just and never before push the event further back: "He had already gone."
- When can introduce either event, so the tense decides the meaning: "When I got home, she had cooked dinner."

When the past simple is enough

- If the order is clear from the words, English often keeps both events in the past simple.
- "I got up, had breakfast and left" needs no past perfect because the order is obvious.
- With before or after, the past simple is common in everyday speech: "After she ate, she left."
- The past perfect is still better when you want the sequence to be exact.

Past perfect in reported speech

- The past perfect reports a past event inside past speech: "He said he had finished the report."
- It also reports thoughts: "I knew she had seen the message."
- The backshift chain runs present simple to past simple to past perfect.
- If the situation is still true, the past simple can stay: "He said he was busy" works if he still is.

Past perfect and duration

- For an action that continued up to a past moment, use had been plus -ing: "She had been waiting for an hour."
- The past perfect simple focuses on a finished result: "She had waited long enough, so she left."
- With stative verbs, the simple form is normal even for duration: "I had known him for years."

- A finished time expression belongs with the past simple, not the past perfect: "I saw him yesterday", never "I had seen him yesterday."

Questions

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

1. When I arrived, the film ____.

2. She ____ before I called.

3. By the time we arrived, the shop ____.

4. He ____ already finished lunch when we got there.

5. I ____ never seen snow before that winter.

6. He said he ____ the report.

7. I knew she ____ the message.

8. After she ____, she went to work.

9. She ____ for an hour when the bus came.

10. I ____ him yesterday at the station.

11. The train ____ when we reached the platform.

12. Before I moved to Rome, I ___ Italian for two years.

13. She was tired because she ___ all night.

14. We ___ the film before, so we knew the ending.

15. He told me that he ___ never been to Paris.

16. By the time she called, I ___ the news.

17. They ___ dinner when the lights went out.

18. I could not enter because I ___ my keys.

19. She ___ him before that party.

20. When the police arrived, the thief ___ .

Answer key

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1. **had already started** — The film started before my arrival, so the earlier event takes the past perfect had started.
2. **had left** — Leaving happened before the call, so the past perfect had left marks the earlier event.
3. **had closed** — The closing came first in the past timeline, so it takes the past perfect had closed.
4. **had** — The earlier event takes had plus the past participle in the past perfect.
5. **had** — Never before describes the first time in the past, which uses the past perfect had seen.
6. **had finished** — Reported speech backshifts the past simple to the past perfect had finished.
7. **had seen** — The seeing happened before my moment of knowing, so it takes the past perfect had seen.
8. **had eaten** — The past perfect had eaten makes the order clear, though the past simple is also possible here.
9. **had been waiting** — The continuing wait before a past moment takes the past perfect continuous had been waiting.
10. **saw** — Yesterday is a finished time expression, so the past simple saw is correct.
11. **had left** — The train left before our arrival, so the past perfect had left marks the earlier event.
12. **had studied** — The study happened before the move, so it takes the past perfect had studied.
13. **had worked** — The work came before the tiredness, so the past perfect had worked marks the earlier action.
14. **had seen** — The earlier viewing takes the past perfect had seen.
15. **had** — Reported speech backshifts to the past perfect had been.
16. **had heard** — Hearing the news came first, so it takes the past perfect had heard.
17. **had finished** — The dinner was complete before the lights went out, so had finished is correct.
18. **had lost** — Losing the keys happened before the inability to enter, so the past perfect had lost fits.
19. **had never met** — The first meeting happened at the party, so the earlier state takes had never met.
20. **had escaped** — The escape came before the police arrived, so the past perfect had escaped is correct.