A Unified Approach to Teaching Verb Tenses

Reference Time (RT)
- Every sentence has a **time**, either stated or implied, called the Reference Time
- Usually an RT is made in one of two ways:
    o 1. By using a time expression (ex/ yesterday, in 5 minutes, by Friday, now, etc.). In many sentences, this time is understood. This is the primary way of making the RT.
    o 2. By using a simple tense verb (ex/ went, will arrive). Simple tenses make the RT when there is no time expression.

Aspect
A. Simple   – the verb occurs **at** the RT.
                 - implies a completed / finished state.

B. Continuous - the verb is occurring **at** the RT.
                 - implies a continuing / unfinished / in-progress state
                 - must be an action verb

C. Perfect   - the verb occurs **BEFORE** the RT.
                 - the RT needs to be established before you can use a perfect aspect verb (either stated explicitly or assumed)
                 - the choice of whether to use "perfect" or "perfect continuous" depends on the situation, defined by "The 3 Cases" (see C1 below)

Working through the 12 main Verb Tenses

Overview: These are not 12 separate ideas; there are only about 4 or 5 inter-related concepts that tie all of the verb tenses together. The key to using verb tenses effectively is understanding these few concepts and realizing how a few subtle changes to these concepts bring about the 12 verb tenses.

	Past	Present	Future
Simple	ate	eat	Will eat / be going to eat / be eating* / eat*
Continuous	was eating	be eating	will be eating
Perfect	had eaten	have eaten	will have eaten
Perfect Continuous	had been eating	have been eating	will have been eating

*though these are present verb tenses in form, they can be used with future meaning

A. The Simple Tenses

1. Simple Present

– for **Action verbs,** this is the only verb tense that doesn't really fit on a timeline, as it refers to GENERAL TIME (not a specific moment in time)

   ***ex/ I eat Kraft Dinner three times a day.***

```
                        NOW        (this sentence doesn't fit
                                        on a timeline)
_____|_____
```

- for **Non-action verbs**, the RT is usually "NOW".

    ex/ I am hungry (now). The RT (Now) can be assumed because there is only one present moment.
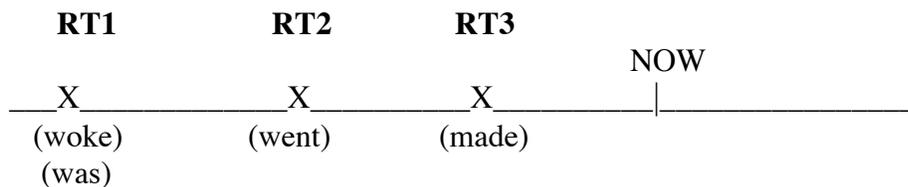
```
                         RT
                        NOW
_____|_____
                         X
                        (am)
```
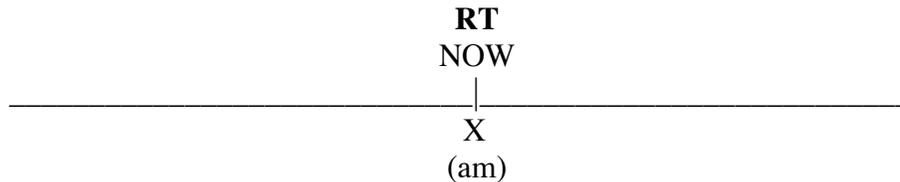
2. Simple Past – completed / finished verb **at** a past RT.

    ex/ I saw a movie last night. The time expression "*last night*" makes the RT. "Saw" occurred at that RT.

```
                  RT
           - Last night -      NOW
_____X_____|_____
                (saw)
```
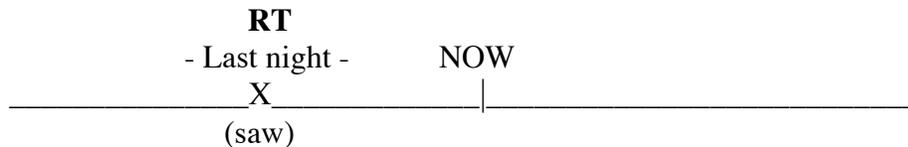
- When we have multiple simple past verbs, **action verbs** happen "one after the other" and move the RT to the right, whereas **non-action verbs** occur all at the same RT.

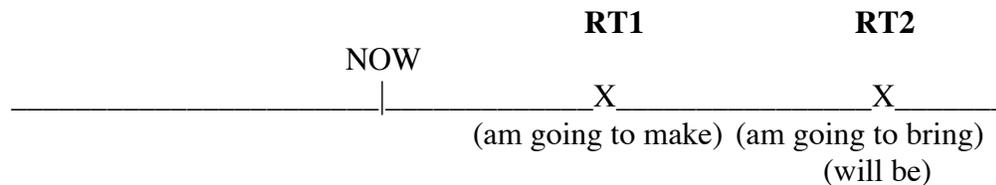   ***ex/ I woke up and was hungry, so I went downstairs and made Kraft Dinner.***

```
     RT1            RT2            RT3
                                            NOW
___X_____X_____X_____|_____
  (woke)        (went)        (made)
  (was)
```

3. Simple Future – completed / finished verb **at** a future RT.

> ex/ *The KD will be ready in 10 minutes.* The time expression "*in 10 minutes*" makes the RT.

```
                                    RT
                 NOW          - 10 min from now -
_____|_____X_____
                                             (will be)
```

- When we have multiple simple future verbs, **action verbs** happen "one after the other" and move the RT to the right, whereas **non-action verbs** occur all at the same RT.

> ex/ *I'm going to make some KD and bring it to my class – they'll be moved.*

```
                                 RT1                RT2
           NOW
_____|_____X_____X_____
                        (am going to make) (am going to bring)
                                                (will be)
```
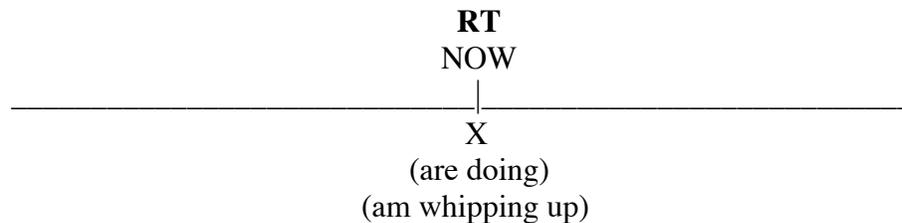
*Note: There are differences in usage between the four Simple Future tenses, but they all look very similar on a timeline, so their differences are not discussed here.

B. The Continuous Tenses

1. Present Continuous – continuing / in-progress action **at** a present RT (Now). There is only one "Now", so the present RT (Now) doesn't need to be stated explicitly.
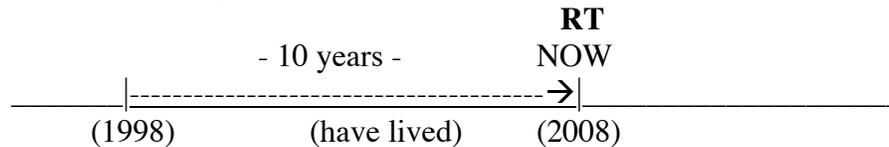
> ex/ *Hey John, what are you doing (now)?*
> *I'm whipping up some KD (now).*

```
                         RT
                        NOW
_____|_____
                        X
                   (are doing)
                (am whipping up)
```
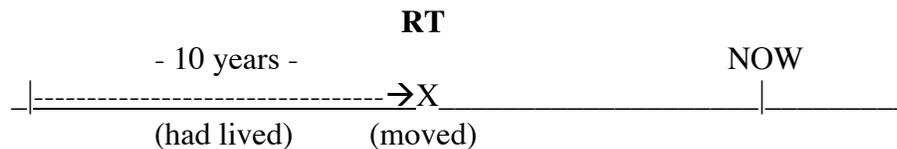
2. Past Continuous – continuing / in-progress action **at** a past RT. The past RT must be created, either by a past time expression or Simple Past verb.

ex/ *Last night at 2:05am, I was throwing together some KD.*
[Note: the past RT is made by the time expression "*Last night at 2:05am*"]

```
                        RT
                    - 2:05am -          NOW
_____X_____|_____
                  (was throwing
                    together)
```

ex/ *I went into the kitchen and screamed; my cat was eating my Kraft Dinner!* [Note: the two simple past verbs happen one after the other, moving the RT with them. The verb "*was eating*" was in progress at the same moment as the verb "*screamed*".]

```
    RT1             RT2
                                NOW
____X_____X_____|_____
  (went)       (screamed)
               (was eating)
```

ex/ *It was raining hard and I was walking across the street when suddenly a Kraft Dinner truck crashed into me!* [Note: the past RT is made by the Simple Past verb "*crashed*"; the verbs "*was raining*" and "*was walking*" were in progress at the moment of "*crashed*". The main time of this sentence (the RT) is the moment of the crash. Two unfinished actions (*was raining* and *was walking)* and one finished action (*crashed)* all occurred at that moment, the past RT]

```
                    RT
                                NOW
_____X_____|_____
                (crashed)
              (was raining)
              (was walking)
```

3. Future Continuous – continuing / in-progress action **at** a future RT. The future RT must be created, either by a future time expression or Simple Future verb.

ex/ ***Don't phone me at 8pm; I'll be making a big batch of KD.***
[Note: the time expression "at 8pm" makes the RT, the Simple Future verb "*don't phone*" refers to a complete action at the RT, and the Future Continuous verb "*will be making*" will be continuing / in progress at the RT]

<pre>
                                                      RT
                           NOW   - 8pm -
—————————————————————————|————————————————X—————————
                                                  (don't phone)
                                                  (will be making)
</pre>

Practice Activities:

Draw the following sentences on a timeline.

1. I was flossing last night when something suddenly fell out - it was a piece of KD!

<pre>
               ——————————————————————|——————————————————————
</pre>

2. When you arrive at the train station at 8pm, I'll be waiting for you. I'll be wearing the one-piece leotard.

<pre>
               ——————————————————————|——————————————————————
</pre>

C. The Perfect and Perfect Continuous Tenses

-All Perfect and Perfect Continuous verbs occur **BEFORE** the RT. The RT must be created separately, usually in the sentence or phrase prior to the Perfect / Perfect Continuous verb. From Part I above, we know that the RT is created with either a time expression or a simple tense verb.

Overview of Present Perfect, Past Perfect, and Future Perfect

1. **PRESENT**   **+**   **PERFECT**
    (this part shows that the   (this part means **BEFORE**
    RT is "present", or "Now")   the RT)

    ex/ *(By now,) I have lived here for 10 years.* [Note: the verb tense is Present Perfect, which necessarily has an RT of "Now" – it doesn't need to be stated explicitly because there is only one present moment. The Present Perfect verb "*have lived*" covers a time period **BEFORE** now]

    ```
                                              RT
                  - 10 years -              NOW
    _____|-----------------------------------→|_____
        (1998)            (have lived)     (2008)
    ```

2. **PAST**   **+**   **PERFECT**
    (the RT is a past time)   (this part means **BEFORE** the RT)

    ex/ *Before I moved here, I had lived in Elbow for 10 years.* [Note: the verb tense is Past Perfect, so the RT has to be in the past. In this example, the past RT is made with the Simple Past verb "*moved*". Then, the Past Perfect verb, "*had lived*" covers a time period **BEFORE** that past RT]

    ```
                             RT
           - 10 years -                              NOW
    _|----------------------------→X_____|_____
           (had lived)       (moved)
    ```

3. **FUTURE**   **+**   **PERFECT**
    (the RT is a future time)   (this part means **BEFORE** the RT)

    ex/ ***By the time she graduates. she will have lived here for 10 years.*** [Note: the verb tense is Future Perfect, so the RT has to be in the future. This future RT is made with the time expression "*by next July*". Then the Future Perfect verb, "*will have lived*" covers a time period **BEFORE** that future RT]

    ```
                                                        RT
                      NOW        - 10 years -
    _____|-----------------------------|-------------------------→X___
                             (will have lived)     (graduate)
    ```
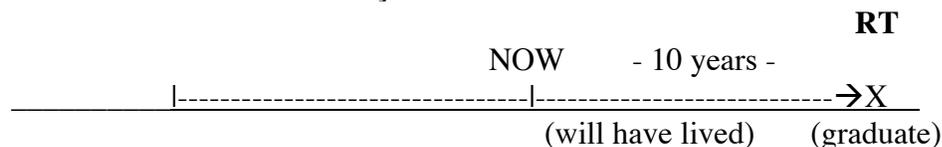
1. Present Perfect and Present Perfect Continuous

> ## The 3 Cases – Distinguishing between *Perfect* and *Perfect Continuous* Verb Tenses

- A common student question is: "What's the difference between **Present Perfect** and **Present Perfect Continuous** verb tenses?" The 3 Cases help to answer this question. Note: the 3 Cases apply to Past and Future Perfect / Perfect Continuous as well.

- In a nutshell,
- when using **Present Perfect** or **Present Perfect Continuous**, the RT is always **NOW.**
- when using "FOR / SINCE", **Present Perfect** ≅ **Present Perfect Continuous**
- when not using "FOR / SINCE", these two tenses are very different.

Case 1 – **With "FOR/SINCE", related to a "How Long?" question.**
- This "How long?" question must continue from the past up to the RT, which is 'NOW" for all Present Perfect verbs.

Present Perfect ≅ Present Perfect Continuous in Case 1.

ex/ *How long have you studied English? ≅ How long have you been studying English?*
ex/ *I have studied English for 10 years ≅ I have been studying English for 10 years.*
ex/ *I have studied English since 1998 ≅ I have been studying English since 1998.*

```
                                             RT
                      - 10 years -           NOW
_____|-------------------------------------→|_____
   (1998)          (have studied)        (2008)
```
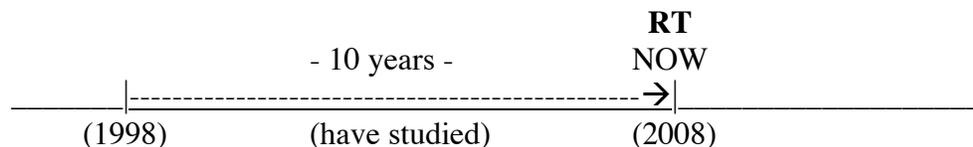
- **Note A**: only Present Perfect can be used with Non-Action verbs, not Present Perfect Continuous.
        ex/ *I have known him since high school*   √
        ex/ *I have been knowing him since high school.*   X

- **Note B**: Case 1 generally cannot be used with "single-moment" verbs (ie. verbs that are not continue-able over a period of time. For example, start, finish, join, begin, quit, get married, etc.).

ex/ *I have started level 40 for 2 weeks   X*
ex/ *I have been starting level 40 for 2 weeks   X*
ex/ *I have <u>been</u> in level 40 for 2 weeks   √*
ex/ *I <u>started</u> level 40 2 weeks ago   √* (Simple Past with a past RT)

- **Note C:** The presence of the word "for" does not guarantee Case 1, as this word can be used with other verb tenses as well. Notice the difference between the following 2 sentences:
   ex/ *I lived in Korea for 10 years.*

    - In this sentence, the verb tense is Simple Past, so the RT is that 10-year period in the past, not continuing up to NOW. Therefore, this person is not living in Korea now.

```
                    RT
                  (live)                              NOW
_____|---------------------------→|_____|_____
                  (10 years)
```
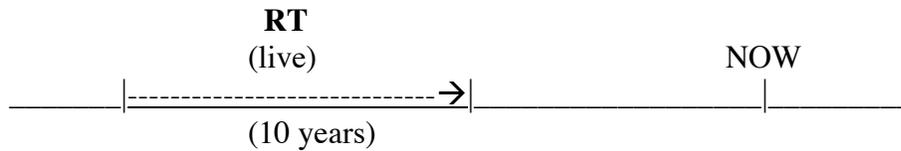
    ex/ *I have lived / have been living in Saskatoon for 10 years.*
    - In the second example, the verb tense is Present Perfect / Present Perfect Continuous Case 1, so the RT is "Now". That means that the action (living) has continued from the past up till NOW. Therefore, this person is living in Saskatoon now.

```
                            RT
                  (live)    NOW
_____|---------------------------→|_____
                  (10 years)
```
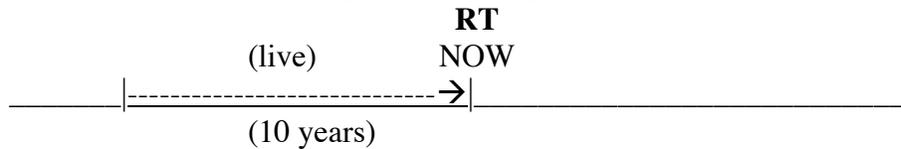
Case 2 – <u>WITHOUT "FOR / SINCE".</u> Present Perfect Continuous
- There are two types of Case 2
    <u>**Case 2a**</u>   **– Recent habits / new regular actions**
        - Case 2a is used for "new habits". This contrasts with Simple Present, which is used for general habits.
        - Key words: "lately" / "recently". These words are implied even when they are not mentioned directly.
        - when the phrase "a lot" is used with Case 2a, it refers to "high frequency" rather than "large amount".

    ex/ *I've been working really hard lately.*

```
                                        RT
(work hard)    (work hard)    (work hard)   NOW
___X_____X_____X_____|_____
        |---------- New habit ----------|
```
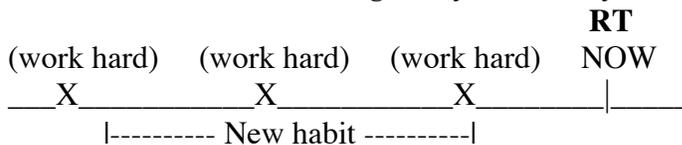
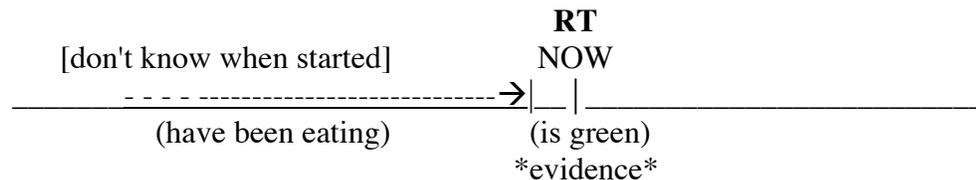   ex/ *I've been going to sleep early lately.*

> ex/ *He's been eating a lot of junk food recently.*
> ex/ *She's been acting really strange (recently).*
> ex/ *Long time no see! What have you been doing with yourself?*

Note: Although the words "lately/recently" seem to have a similar meaning to the expression "these days", they are used with different verb tenses. "Lately/recently" refer to a new habit that began ***shortly BEFORE*** the RT (emphasis on what you have been doing in the recent past), which makes them a perfect match for a ***perfect*** tense verb, specifically Case 2a. In contrast, "these days" refers to a current habit / a habit that you have ***NOW***, (with an RT of either NOW or general time), which makes it a match for ***Present Continuous*** or ***Simple Present***.

> ex/ *She has been acting really strange recently.* (Case 2a)
> ex/ *She is acting really strange these days.* (Present Continuous)

Case 2b   **- Used to describe an action that continued from a short time in the past until Now or JUST BEFORE Now (but we can still see evidence of the action Now).**

> ex/ **Your tongue is green - have you been eating grass?**
> ex/ **Why are Suzy's cheeks so red? Maybe she's been drinking.**

```
                                             RT
     [don't know when started]              NOW
     _____ - - - - ------------------------->|__ |_____
            (have been eating)              (is green)
                                            *evidence*
```

Case 3 – <u>WITHOUT</u> "FOR / SINCE". Present Perfect

- To understand Present Perfect Case 3, think about this analogy:

Imagine that we all carry around a ***Bag of Experiences*** with us at all times. Whenever we experience something, we can put that into our Bag of Experiences. For example, if I watch the movie *Star Wars*, then that completed experience goes into the bag. Then, someone can ask me:
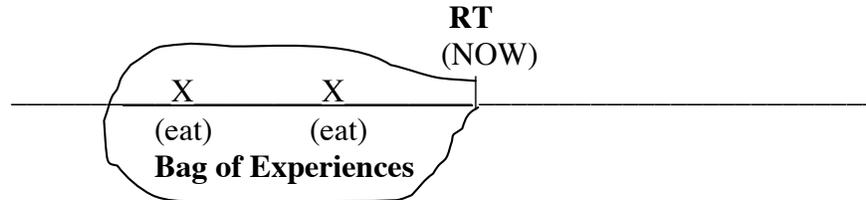
> **A:** "Have you seen *Star Wars*?"
> **B:** (I look into my Bag of Experiences and see "watching *Star Wars*" there, so I reply: "Yes, I have seen it."

Key Words: These words are frequently used with Case 3: already, yet, ever, never, once, twice, three times, so far, before

Note A: The RT is NOW because I have my Bag of Experiences Now. Perfect tenses refer to the time BEFORE the RT, so all of these experiences were completed before Now.

Note B: Case 3 doesn't really fit onto a timeline easily, as there is no ordering of the events in the Bag of Experiences - an experience is either there or it isn't. For example, you would say: "I have seen *Star Wars*" whether you saw it 30 years ago or last night. It is possible to draw Case 3 on a timeline as long as one remembers that the placement of the experience in the "bag" is not significant.

ex/ *I have eaten there twice.*

RT

(NOW)

X   X

(eat)   (eat)

Bag of Experiences

Note C: We don't use past time expressions with Case 3 because that would make a past RT, which is impossible for Present Perfect. If we want to use a past RT, then we use Simple Past tense.

        ex/ *I have seen* Star Wars <u>*last year*</u>.   X
        ex/ *I have seen Star Wars*.   √
        ex/ *I saw* Star Wars *last year*.   √   (Simple Past)

- Quite often, we will ask someone if a certain experience is in their Bag of Experiences by using Case 3, and then if the answer is affirmative, we will ask **when** the incident occurred, using Simple Past.

        ex/ *A: Have you been to Moose Jaw?* (Case 3)
           B: *Yes, I have been there once*. (Case 3)
           A: *When did you go?* (Simple Past)
           B: *I went there last month.* (Simple Past)

Note D: By default, the Bag of Experiences for a person covers the period of time from a person's birth until NOW. However, within the full Bag of Experiences, there can be more recent Bags of Experiences that cover a more recent period of time. In other words, we can limit the starting time of our Bag of Experiences to just cover what we have done *today*, *this month*, *this year*, *since Thursday*, *recently*, *etc*.

        ex/ *How many times have you been to Rome?* (in your whole life - the full Bag of Experiences)

ex/ ***How many times have you been to Rome this year?*** (a smaller Bag of Experiences - just the experiences since January 1st of this year).

- Remember that the Bag of Experiences has to continue till Now in order to use Case 3. We can say: "I've had 8 coffees today" because "today" is still Now, but we cannot say: "I've had 8 coffees yesterday", because "yesterday" would be a past RT, which is impossible for Present Perfect.

ALARM BELLS RINGING!!

- Can Case 3 use the key words from Case 1 ("Since") and from Case 2 ("Recently")? Yes, but they are used differently.

"SINCE" - Case 1 vs Case 3

Case 1 - ex/ *I've lived here since 1998.*
- Related to a "How Long" question. √
- Continuing from the past until the RT (NOW) √

Case 3 - ex/ *I've seen that movie 3 times since July.*
- NOT related to a "How long" question. This would be related to a "How many times" question.
- NOT continuous "watching" from the past to RT.
 - "SINCE" just limits the Bag of Experiences.

"RECENTLY" - Case 2a vs Case 3

Case 2a - ex/ *I've been sleeping well recently.*
- recent / new habitual action   ∴ Case 2a

Case 3 - ex/ *I've eaten there twice recently.*
- "recently" limits the size of the Bag of Experiences to the time period of "the recent past"
- not implying that this is a new habit   ∴ Case 3

Recap: The 3 Cases - A Side-by-side Comparison

Case 1   ex/ ***I have worked / been working in Japan for 10 years.***
- I started working there 10 years ago, and I still work there now.
- related to a "How long" question.
- key word: "for"
- Present Perfect ≅ Present Perfect Continuous

Case 2a   ex/ ***I've been doing a lot of work in Japan lately.***
- my recent habit is "working in Japan on a high-frequency basis".
- I'm probably not working in Japan right now.
- key word: "lately"

Case 2b   ex/ *I've been working in Japan.*
- an action continuing from some time in the past until now or just before now with evidence of the action still present.
- this quote could be made at the Vancouver airport on the speaker's trip home from Japan (being in the airport is the "evidence" of the previous action)

 A: What are you doing here?!
 B: Actually, I'm on my way home; I've been working in Japan.

Case 3   ex/ *I've worked in Japan before.*
- "working in Japan" is in my Bag of Experiences.
- I'm not working in Japan NOW.
- key word: "before"

_____

Practice Activities

For the following sentences, write the case # and draw the information on the timeline.

1. Bob, you smell like smoke. Have you been smoking?

_____|_____

2. I don't want to see that movie because I've already seen it twice.

_____|_____

3. You've worked at the KD factory for 9 years; it's time to change to President's Choice.

_____|_____

4. I've been training really hard, and I've been working with the best coaches in the world; I'm ready for the KD Challenge!

_____|_____

5. I've had 7 cups of coffee this morning, and I'll probably have 7 more this afternoon.

_____|_____

For next session, find a few sentences with Present Perfect or Present Perfect Continuous and bring them with you. Also, please bring your grammar textbooks.

__Practice and Review__

Decide if the following sentences are grammatically correct or not. Be able to explain why using the ideas we have discussed so far.

1. I've been seeing that movie three times recently.

_____|_____

2. Your pronunciation is a lot better! Have you been working on it?

_____|_____

3. Someone has stolen my chocolate while I was sleeping last night.

_____|_____

4. My friend has been living in New York for 20 years, but he still didn't go up the Empire State Building.

_____|_____

5. My parents have gotten married for almost 50 years now.

_____|_____

2. Past Perfect and Past Perfect Continuous

- The main difference between Present Perfect and Past Perfect is that whereas Present Perfect has a present RT (ie. NOW), Past Perfect has a past RT. The Past Perfect tense verb takes place in the time period **BEFORE** this past RT.
- With Present Perfect tenses, there is only one possible RT (Now), so it can assumed without explicit mentioning. For example, there is no need to say "By now" in the following sentence:
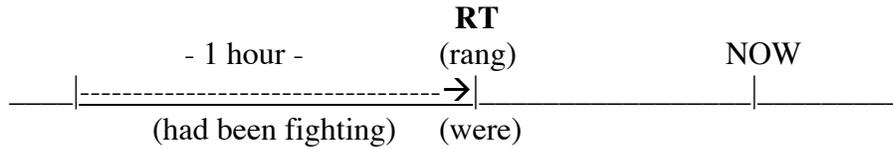
ex/ *By now, I have been studying English for 10 years.*

- However, with Past Perfect tenses, there are infinite possible past RT"s, so the past RT must be explicitly stated. Recall from Part I that this is done in two main ways:
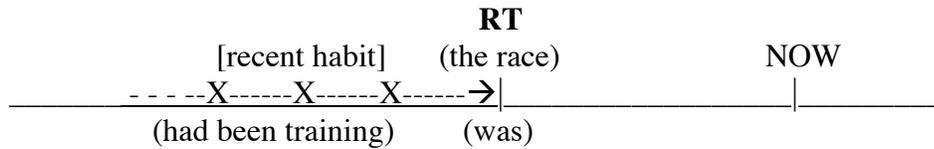
1. by using a past time expression   **ex/ *By 2pm yesterday, they had arrived.***
2. by using a Simple Past verb   **ex/ *When she called, they had already left.***

- Basically, the 3 Cases from Present Perfect and Present Perfect Continuous also apply to Past Perfect and Past Perfect Continuous.
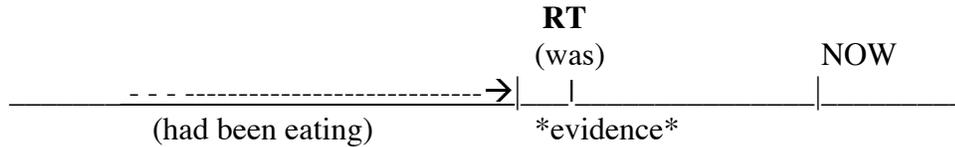
Case 1:   ex/ *When the bell rang, they had fought / had been fighting for an hour, so they were very tired.*
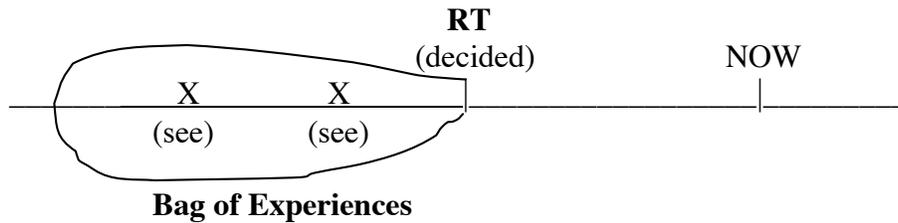
```
                                    RT
            - 1 hour -            (rang)              NOW
    ____|--------------------------------->|_____|_____
            (had been fighting)    (were)
```

Case 2a: ex/ *Before the race, he had been training hard, so he was in good shape.*

```
                                    RT
            [recent habit]      (the race)            NOW
    _____- - - --X------X------X------>|_____|_____
            (had been training)      (was)
```

Case 2b: ex/ *It was clear from his green teeth that he had been eating grass.*

```
                                    RT
                                  (was)              NOW
    _____- - - ------------------------->|____|_____|_____
            (had been eating)         *evidence*
```

Case 3:   ex/ *He decided not to go to the movie because he had already seen it twice.*

```
                                    RT
                                 (decided)           NOW
    _____X_____X_____|_____|_____
                    (see)        (see)
```
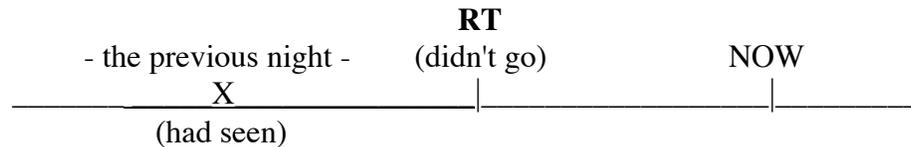
Bag of Experiences

> **NOTE:** There is another possibility in Past Perfect Case 3 that does not exist in Present Perfect Case 3. Recall that in Present Perfect Case 3, you COULD NOT mention a past time, as it would create a past RT. To fix this, one would simply change the verb tense to Simple Past.
>
> ex/ *I have seen that movie <u>yesterday.</u>*   X
> ex/ *I saw that movie yesterday.*   √   (Simple Past)

- However, you CAN mention an earlier past time in Past Perfect Case 3 because we have no other verb tenses to choose from (unlike Present Perfect, where Simple Past was an option). In this case, instead of a "Bag of Experiences", there is an actual mark on the timeline.

ex/ *I didn't go to the movie yesterday because I had seen it the night before.*

```
                              RT
- the previous night -    (didn't go)              NOW
_____|_____|_____
            X
        (had seen)
```
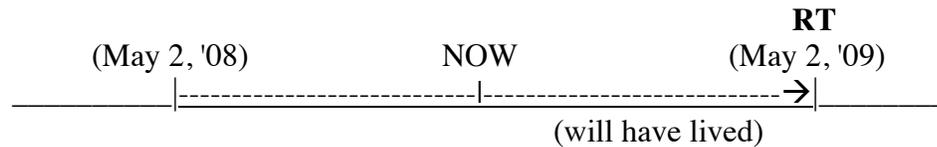
3. Future Perfect and Future Perfect Continuous

- Future Perfect is very similar to Past Perfect, except that a future RT needs to be made using either a future time expression or a Simple Future tense verb.
    1. by using a future time expression **ex/ *By 8pm tonight, they will have arrived.***
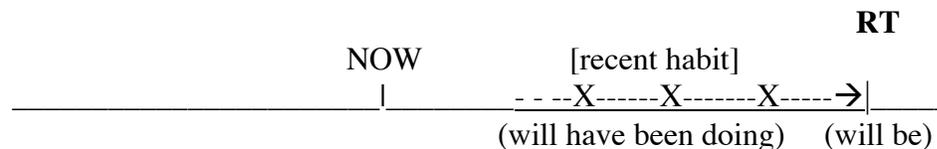   2. by using a Simple Future verb **ex/ *When she calls, they will have already left.***

- Basically, the 3 Cases from Present Perfect and Present Perfect Continuous also apply to Future Perfect and Future Perfect Continuous.

Case 1:   **ex/ *By May 2nd, I will have lived / will have been living here for 1 year.***

```
                                                 RT
     (May 2, '08)              NOW           (May 2, '09)
_____|--------------------------|------------------------->|_____
                                        (will have lived)
```
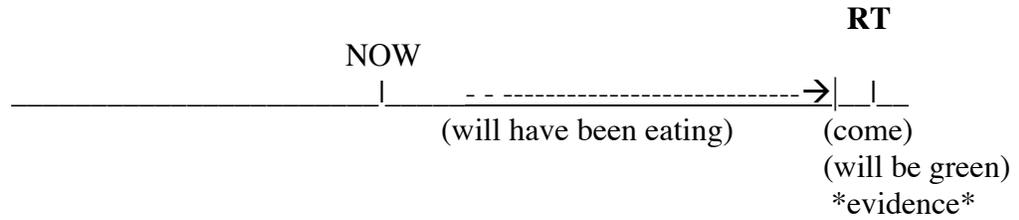
Case 2a: **NOTE:** Case 2 situations rarely come up in Future Perfect Continuous, but they are possible.

ex/ *I will be in good shape for the tournament because I will have been doing a lot of training.*

```
                                                    RT
               NOW              [recent habit]
_____|_____- - --X------X-------X----->|_____
                                    (will have been doing)   (will be)
```

Case 2b: **ex/** *When I come in, my mouth will be green because I will have been eating grass.*

RT
NOW

—————————————————|———- - - --------------------------→|__|__
                      (will have been eating)   (come)
                                              (will be green)
                                           evidence

Case 3: **ex/** *By the time he arrives, I will have already left.*

RT
NOW

————————————————|————————————X————————————|———
                            (will have left)   (arrives)
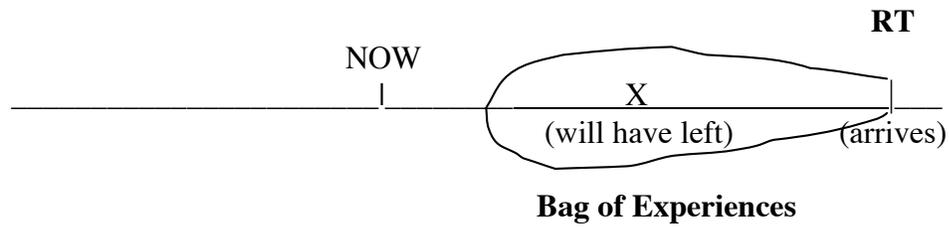
Bag of Experiences

Note: Like Past Perfect, Future Perfect Case 3 can also refer to a specific future time before the RT. In this case, there would be no "Bag of Experiences".

ex/ *Tony arrives at 9pm, but I will have left one hour earlier, so we'll miss each other.*
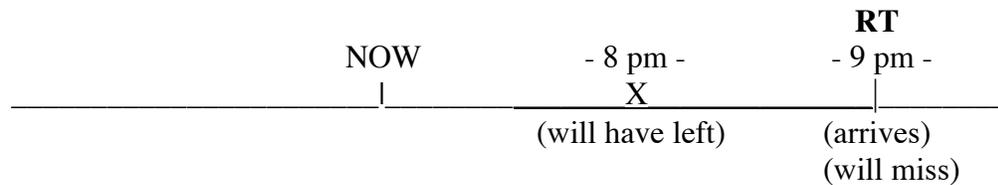
                                                  RT
NOW   - 8 pm -   - 9 pm -

————————————————|——————————X——————————|————————
                            (will have left)   (arrives)
                                           (will miss)

Practice Activities

For the following sentences, write the case # and draw the information on the timeline.

1. When she arrived, I had been waiting for 40 minutes, so I wasn't pleased.

—————————————————————|—————————————————————

2. Today's Monday, and the books usually take about 2 days to get here, so come back on Thursday; I'm sure they will have arrived by then.

—————————————————————|—————————————————————

3. I heard a slurping sound and suddenly remembered that I had left my KD unattended in the kitchen with Chili, my cat.

—————————————————————|—————————————————————

4. When you come on Friday, bring your skis. Mine will have been fixed on Thursday, so we can hit the slopes on the weekend.

—————————————————————|—————————————————————

5. I was so excited for the game to begin. My team had been training hard, so we were ready to set boot to buttock.

—————————————————————|—————————————————————