Present Perfect or Past Simple?

The past simple lives in finished time. The present perfect joins the past to now.

A2–C1 · Philo & Sophia, Lessons 2 and 3

I sold it yesterday. · I've sold it, so it's gone.

PAST SIMPLE

Sophia (SUBJECT) · sold (PAST FORM) · the calf (OBJECT) · yesterday. (FINISHED TIME)

PRESENT PERFECT

Sophia (SUBJECT) · has sold (HAVE / HAS + PAST PARTICIPLE) · the calf. (OBJECT) · (It's gone now.) RESULT NOW



Which one?

the same event, two ways of seeing it

THE QUESTION	PAST SIMPLE	PRESENT PERFECT
Is the time finished?	I **saw** the vet **yesterday**. *yesterday is over*	I'**ve seen** the vet **today**. *today isn't over yet*
Do we say when?	She **visited** Rome **in 2019**. *a time is given*	She'**s visited** Rome twice. *no time: her experience*
Does it matter now?	I **lost** my key, but I found it. *part of a story*	I'**ve lost** my key! *I still haven't got it*
Is it still true?	He **lived** here for ten years. *he doesn't now*	He'**s lived** here for ten years. *he still does*
News or details?	It **hit** at three in the morning. *the details*	A storm **has hit** the coast. *the first news*
Whose life?	Grandad **ploughed** with horses. *his working life is over*	I'**ve never ploughed** with horses. *my life goes on*
Morning or afternoon?	I **fed** the hens **this morning**. *said in the afternoon*	I'**ve fed** the hens **this morning**. *said in the morning*
Asking questions	**When did** you **arrive**?	**How long have** you **been** here?

Once you give a finished time (yesterday, in 2019, ago, last week), use the past simple

Signal words

clues, not rules

PAST SIMPLE

yesterday · last week · ago · in 2010 · when I was young · then

PRESENT PERFECT

just · already · yet · ever · never · so far · recently · for · since · this week

Never with ago: not "I've seen it two days ago"

for or since?

how long

for + a length of time:
for three years, for a week, for ages

since + a starting point:
since 2020, since Monday, since I was a child

*We've had the farm **since** 1998.*

for also works with the past simple; since doesn't

just, already, yet, still

*I've **just** milked the goats.* (a moment ago)

*I've **already** milked them.* (sooner than you thought)

*Have you milked them **yet**? No, not **yet**.*

*I **still** haven't milked them.*

yet goes at the end, in questions and negatives

been or gone?

did they come back?

*Philo **has gone** to market.*
He's there now.

*Philo **has been** to market.*
He went, and he's back.

*Have you ever **been** to Seville?*

For experience, use been

How to make them

- Past simple: *worked, sold, went* · ***Did** you go? I **didn't** go.*
- Present perfect: **have / has + past participle** · ***Have** you gone? She **hasn't** gone.*
- Irregular forms: see Grammar Guide 4.

Present perfect continuous

- An activity up to now: *I've **been ploughing** all morning.*
- With a visible result: *Your boots are muddy. Have you **been walking** in the field?*
- How much → simple: *I've **ploughed** three fields.*

Spanish speakers, watch out

- *Ayer he visto a Juan* = Yesterday I **saw** Juan, not ~~I have seen~~.
- *Llevo tres años aquí* = I'**ve been** here for three years, not ~~I am here~~.
- *Acabo de llegar* = I'**ve just** arrived.

Want more?

Sophia explains **An Incident with a Shelf** (Lesson 2) and **Two Points Joined** (Lesson 3).
See also Grammar Guides 5.

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