

34 Past perfect simple

1 Form

We form the past perfect with *had* + past participle. The regular past participle ends in *-ed* (e.g. *finished*).

POSITIVE	<i>I had already seen the film. She had met him before. We had finished early.</i>
NEGATIVE	<i>I had not (hadn't) seen it before. He had not (hadn't) met her before. They had not (hadn't) finished the job.</i>
QUESTIONS	<i>Had you seen the film? (Yes, I had.) Had they finished the job? (No, they hadn't.) Where had he met her before?</i>

Irregular past participles, e.g. *seen*, *met*, ➤ page 348




In 1999, Eileen Collins became the first woman commander of a US space flight, but four years earlier, she **had** also **become** the first female American pilot in space.

Pronunciation ➤ 1.15

2 The order of past actions

We can use the past perfect to show which action happened first:

(2) *Before I finally found a job, (1) I **had been** to about thirty interviews.*

 If one action happens immediately after the other, we use the past simple for both:

*X When Colin **had arrived** at the door, Sheila **opened** it straight away.*

*✓ When Colin **arrived** at the door, Sheila **opened** it straight away.*

We often use adverbs of time and linking words with the past perfect:

*Four years **earlier**, she **had become** the first American female pilot in space. (adverb)*

*I'd never **liked** Japanese food **before** but the meal Yuki cooked was lovely. (adverb)*

*By **the time** Grace decided to apply for the job, the position **had been filled**. (linking phrase)*

We often use the past perfect in stories to show a series of events in the past:

*There was no answer from the house. No face at the window. Time **had stopped** here ... Where was she? Where **had she gone**? The grass **had grown** thick ... (from *Ghostwalk*, by Rebecca Stott)*

3 Past perfect or past simple?

We usually use the past simple, not the past perfect

• if the order of actions is clear: *I **got** my first job after I **left** university.*

• if the order of actions is the same as the order of the verbs in the sentence. Compare:

*When I **got** to the café, everyone **ordered** their drinks.*

(= First, I got to the café, then everyone ordered their drinks.)

*When I **got** to the café, everyone **had ordered** their drinks.*

(= First, everyone ordered their drinks, then I got to the café.)

4 Giving reasons

We can use the past perfect to give a reason for an action or situation, often with *because*:

*Eileen Collins became the commander **because** she **had already flown** as a space pilot.*

*Emily was unhappy – her husband **hadn't bought** her a birthday present.*

5 Superlatives

We often use the past perfect (and *ever*) with superlative adjectives:

*It was the **worst** meal I **had ever eaten**! I never went there again.*

We also use the past perfect after *it was the first, second, etc.*:

*We went to Egypt in 1996. It was **the first time** we'd travelled outside Europe.*

Present perfect + superlatives ➤ Unit 37.4