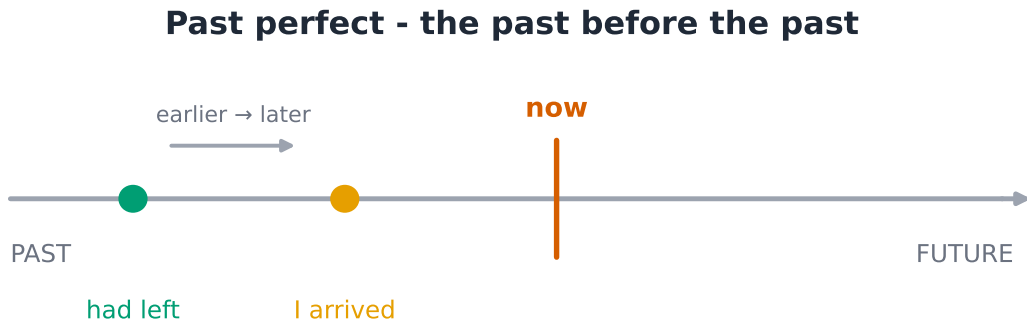


Past perfect

English Grammar · B1

Structure (had + past participle)



The Past Perfect expresses the “past of the past” — an action that was completed **before** a specific point in the past.

Structure: + had + (same for all persons)

When I arrived, the train had left.

By the time I arrived, the train had already left. (Left first, then arrived)

She had finished her work before lunch.

She had finished her work before lunch.

Note Contraction: I'd, she'd, they'd (= had).

The Earlier of Two Past Actions

The past perfect tense is used **along with** the simple past tense to indicate which of two past events happened **first or second**:

- The earlier event → **Past Perfect Tense** (had done).
- The later event → **Simple Past Tense** (did).

The film had started when we got there.

We got there, and the movie had already started.

Timeline Comparison: had started (earlier) → got there (later).

Note The past perfect is only used when it is necessary to emphasize the sequence; for straightforward chronological narration, the simple past can be used for both actions.

Common Errors

- × ~~After he had left, I had cleaned the room.~~ → ✓ After he had left, I **cleaned** the room. — Only the action that happened **earlier** takes the past perfect, not both.
- × ~~When I had arrived, the train left.~~ → ✓ When I arrived, the train **had left**. — Whichever happened first uses had done; reversing them reverses the timeline.
- × ~~I had seen this film.~~ (standalone sentence) → ✓ I **have seen** this film. — The past perfect requires a “past reference point”; without one, use the present perfect or simple past.
- Remember strong signal words: **by the time** + simple past, the main clause usually takes the past perfect: *By the time we arrived, the film **had started**.*