

Present Perfect vs Present Perfect Continuous

Use

Both tenses are used to express that an action began in the past and is still going on or has just finished. In many cases, both forms are correct, but there is often a difference in meaning: We use the *Present Perfect Simple* mainly to express that an action is completed or to emphasize the result. We use the *Present Perfect Progressive* to emphasize the duration or continuous course of an action.

Result or duration?

Do you want to express what has happened so far or how long an action has been going on yet?

Present Perfect Simple

Result (what / how much / how often)

I have written 5 letters. / I have been to London twice.

Present Perfect Progressive

Duration (how long)

I have been writing for an hour.

Certain verbs

The following verbs are usually only used in Present Perfect Simple (not in the progressive form).

- **state:** be, have (for possession only)

Example: We have been on holiday for two weeks.

- **senses:** feel, hear, see, smell, taste, touch

Example: He has touched the painting.

- **brain work:** believe, know, think, understand

Example: I have known him for 3 years.

Emphasis on completion or duration?

Do you want to emphasise the completion of an action or its continuous course (how has somebody spent his time)?

Present Perfect Simple

Emphasis on completion

I have done my homework. (*Meaning: My homework is completed now.*)

Present Perfect Progressive

Emphasis on duration

I have been doing my homework. (*Meaning: That's how I have spent my time. It does not matter whether the homework is completed now.*)

Result or side effect?

Do you want to express that a completed action led to a desired result or that the action had an unwanted side effect?

Present Perfect Simple

desired result

I have washed the car. *(Result: The car is clean now.)*

Present Perfect Progressive

unwanted side effect

Why are you so wet? - I have been washing the car. *(side effect: I became wet when I was washing the car. It does not matter whether the car is clean now.)*

Time + negation: last time or beginning of an action?

In negative sentences: Do you want to express how much time has past since the last time the action took place or since the beginning of the action?

Present Perfect Simple

since the last time

I haven't played that game for years. *(Meaning: It's years ago that I last played that game.)*

Present Perfect Progressive

since the beginning

I haven't been playing that game for an hour, only for 10 minutes. *(Meaning: It's not even an hour ago that I started to play that game.)*

Permanent or temporary?

If an action is still going on and we want to express that it is a permanent situation, we would usually use the Present Perfect Simple. For temporary situations, we would prefer the Present Perfect Progressive. This is not a rule, however, only a tendency.

Present Perfect Simple

permanent

James has lived in this town for 10 years. *(Meaning: He is a permanent resident of this town.)*

Present Perfect Progressive

temporary

James has been living here for a year. *(Meaning: This situation is only temporary. Maybe he is an exchange student and only here for one or two years.)*