

THE PAST INDEFINITE (SIMPLE)



- The Past Indefinite is a synthetic form

e.g. *I worked. He sang*

- But the interrogative and negative forms are built up analytically (i.e., by means of the auxiliary verb *to do* in the Past Indefinite and the *infinitive* of the notional verb without the particle *to*

e.g. *Did you work? Did he work? We did not work. She did not work.*

The Past Indefinite is used in the following cases:

1) to express a single action which took place in the past. The time of the action is often indicated. Yet the Past Indefinite may also be found with such adverbial modifiers of time as **this morning, today, tonight**, etc.

e.g. My mother first heard of him when I was a mere child.

I only met her six months ago.

NB! But sometimes the mention of the time or the place of the action appears unnecessary because reference is made to a particular action which is definite in the mind of the speaker and the hearer.

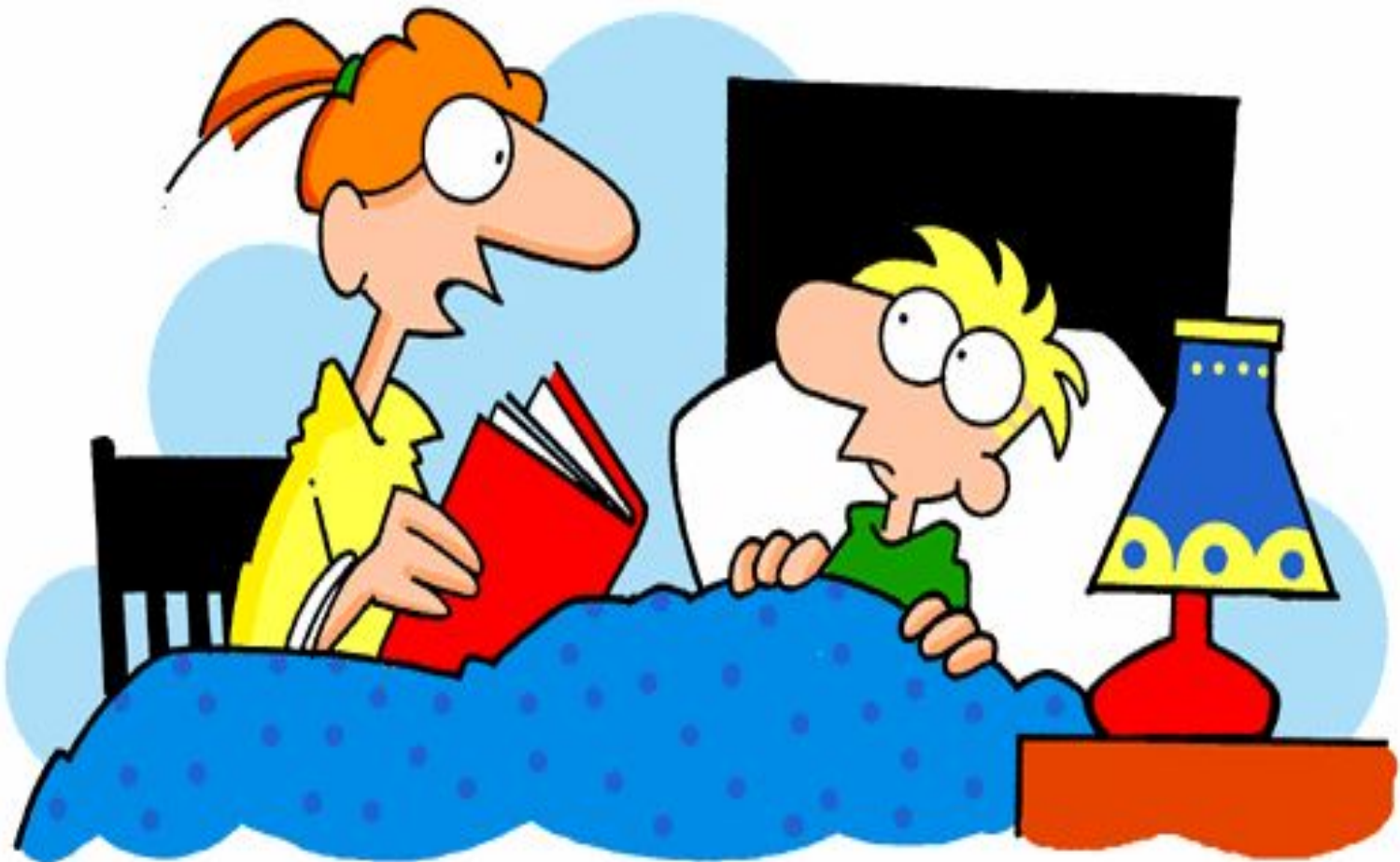
e.g. Sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you.
I slept very badly.



"Didn't you get my e-mail?"

2) to express an action which occupied a whole period of time now over. The period of time is usually indicated in the sentence by means of adverbial phrases with the prepositions **for** or **during** and synonymous expressions.

e.g. I admit I **was** wrong. Remember how we **quarrelled** about it? We **quarrelled** for three days.



**“Romeo and Juliet met online in a chat room.
But their relationship ended tragically
when Juliet’s hard drive died.”**

3) In narration to express a succession of actions.

e.g. So I went up the stairs. I bathed. I changed. Then I went downstairs and cooked and served dinner for three. Then I entertained Mr Stent. Then I wished him a very good night. Then I wished Jack good-bye. Then I took my suit-case and walked out...

4) To express recurrent actions. This meaning is generally supported by the use of adverbial modifiers of frequency such as **often, never, now and again, sometimes, for days, etc.**
e.g. You often mentioned her in your letters.

5) To express permanent actions which indicate continuous, uninterrupted processes in the past, giving a general characteristic of the person or thing denoted by the subject.

e.g. She lived alone in London, and saw no one except me.

NB! In English there are special means of expressing a recurrent or permanent action in the past. They are **used to + infinitive** and **would + infinitive**. **Used to + infinitive**

has only one form that of the past tense which occurs in present-time- and past-time contexts. It generally serves to express recurrent actions which may be either point actions or actions of some duration.

e.g. "She used to give me chocolate,"
murmured he.

NB! Sometimes **used to + infinitive** with a durative verb serves to express a contrast between the past and the present (what was typical of the past is no longer true at present). This meaning is naturally found in present-time contexts.

e.g. "I used to be as sentimental as anyone a few years ago," said Ann.

NB! The negative and interrogative forms of **used to +infinitive** are very seldom found and there is fluctuation in the way they are built up.

e.g. Lena **didn't use to** like the clock, did she? "I'm not mean." "You **usedn't to** be. But you have been lately, haven't you? "Cedric, what's come over you? You **used not to** talk like that." And what **did** they **use to** give you on Sundays?" he was asking as I came in. "**Used** you **to** climb the old apple-tree in the garden?"

NB! Would + infinitive is more restricted in its application than **used to + infinitive**. It is found only in past-time contexts and serves to express only recurrent actions. On the whole, **would + infinitive** is typical of literary style.

e.g. She would often wake up screaming in the night.

6) To express an action going on at a given past moment. We resort to use the Past Indefinite in the following cases:

a) The use of the Past Indefinite becomes obligatory with stative verbs.

e.g. He wanted all her troubles for himself at that moment.

b) The Past Indefinite may be used instead of the Past Continuous with certain durative verbs. They are **to sit, to stand, to lie, to hang, to shine, to gleam, to talk, to speak, to wear, to carry, to walk** and some others.

e.g. The lights in the house **were out**, but a rising moon **gleamed** against one window in the room where little Mary **slept**.

NB! Note that when we speak of inanimate things the Past Indefinite is the norm with the verbs mentioned above.

e.g. On the table **lay** three rows of cards face upwards.

7) To express a future action viewed from the past. This use is found in reported speech and is structurally dependent. It occurs in clauses of time, condition and concession; the Future-in-the-Past or modal verbs are usually used in the principal clause in this case.

e.g. Probably she knew that, whatever happened, he would not give her away.