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English Revisited:

Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

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In this issue of our newsletter we provide an overview of the basic verb tenses to describe actions and background events in the past and point out typical pitfalls. Verb tenses are admittedly one of the trickiest areas of English grammar, but with continued practice and exposure you will certainly be able to get the hang of it. Another thing that is hard to wrap one's mind around is the proliferation of e-scooters, which ostensibly were meant to provide an eco-friendly mode of transportation, but which have proved to be anything but. What are the causes and effects of this development? Read on to our last article and you will be able to express causal relationships in a variety of different ways.

John Nixon

GLOSSARY

pitfall:
problem or danger

to get the hang of sth.:
(informal):
to learn something fairly well in order to be able to do it

to wrap one's mind around sth. (informal):
to understand sth. that is usually difficult

proliferation:
rapid growth

ostensibly:
with a stated goal, but not necessarily true; seemingly

Style Guidelines for Writing Official University Texts in English

The University Communications Department has in collaboration with the Language Center developed a number of style guidelines for publishing official university texts in English, e.g. websites and brochures. Please take a look at these useful tips when publishing university documents in English.

Guidelines

If you are interested in any of the following, please click on the links or **contact us**.

- Regular Courses
- English Graduate Upgrade Certificate
- Workshops for PhD Candidates
- *Schreibwerkstatt* / Writing Center
- *Englischkurse für Uni-Beschäftigte*
- Intercultural Offerings
- English as a Medium of Instruction (Learn how to teach in English!)

@ **Comments**

Do you have any ideas for future issues or would like to give us feedback? Please contact us.

@ **Subscription**

Talking about the Past

Imagine this everyday workplace situation: you had arranged to get in touch with your colleague to talk about putting the finishing touches to an important report. You had agreed to ring at 3 pm but you didn't manage to get through to her. The next day you meet her in the office and you ask her, "I tried to reach you on the phone at 3 but there was no answer. What did you do?" Is your question correctly worded? The correct question is: "What were you doing?"

Past Continuous

You need to use the past continuous form here because you are talking about an action or activity that was in progress at this particular moment in the past.

A possible reply might be:
"Oh, so sorry, I completely forgot. I was checking the accounts at 3. I was not sitting at my desk."
Your colleague started checking at let's say 2:30 and finished at 4. So, at 3 o'clock she was in the middle of that activity. Checking the accounts was in progress at 3.

Your colleague could also have said:
"I was checking the accounts when you rang. So sorry. I was not sitting at my desk."
The idea is the same: the activity of checking was already in progress when it was interrupted by another action, in this case the phone call. The past continuous is used to describe a background or longer activity that is interrupted by a shorter event expressed in the simple past. Some more examples are:

While I was checking the accounts *(background activity),* I noticed several mistakes.
I was writing an email *(background activity)* when Bob spilt tea on my keyboard.

Such a background activity can also last for a longer period.

When I was studying at university *(longer background activity),* I never thought I would work for Daimler one day.
When I last saw Helen, she was trying to find a job in London.
(longer background activity)

Past Perfect Continuous

However, as soon as you mention how long this activity has been going on for, you need to use the past perfect.
When I last saw Helen, she had been trying to find a job in London for several months.
(key word = *for*)

Simple Past

The simple past is used to talk about a state or a completed action in the past. The action can also be repeated or be a habit. In this case the simple past is similar to the verb "used to". The simple form also expresses past events that follow each other.

Our company was founded in 2017.
Whenever Pete travelled to London on business, he stayed with a friend.
(= he used to stay with a friend)
Pete sat down, opened his laptop and started the meeting.

Past Simple vs. Past Continuous

Compare the following two situations:

When the phone rang, Pete answered it.
(one past activity follows the other one)
When the phone rang, Pete was writing his report.
(background activity that was interrupted)

Other Uses

You can also use the simple past and past continuous with a present meaning when you want to soften your message and be less direct.

How much did you want to spend on a new computer?
(the meaning is present = *how much do you want to spend*)
What was the client's name, please?
(= *what is their name?*)
I was wondering if I could talk to you about the minutes you took at yesterday's meeting.
(= *can I talk to you*)
I was hoping to have a quick word with you before you leave. (= *I hope*)

Don't forget that a less direct approach and more indirect way of communication is often appreciated in most relationship-oriented cultures such as that in the UK.

Sylvia Grade

GLOSSARY

to ring:
to call s.o. on the phone

spilt:
past tense of *to spill*

their:
their and *they* can be used when you do not know or do not want to mention somebody's gender

minutes:
the written record of what was said at a meeting
(collocation: *to take the minutes*)

to have a quick word with someone:
to speak to someone briefly

Shared, Dockless E-scooters:
Savior or Scourge

As we make efforts to reduce the human impacts causing climate change, there are many industries presenting solutions. One aspect of climate change, which is particularly relevant in the Stuttgart area, is transportation. There are many ideas about how to reduce the impact of individual transportation on our climate. E-scooters attempt to do so by creating an alternative to the last-mile problem.

E-scooters have become ubiquitous in urban landscapes. Young people ride them on side-walks, weaving in and out of foot traffic. They are seen strewn along sidewalks, and displayed in popular culture. There are a number of different versions of e-scooters: some come in the form of mopeds, and others are standing scooters. Most companies use an app, with which the user scans a QR code to check out the scooter and then drops it off either where they end the trip, or at a fixed location.

Fleets of standing scooters were first seen in San Francisco in 2018 and have spread since then. These scooters originated to encourage the use of public transportation, as many car drivers do not switch to public transportation on account of the last-mile problem. The last-mile problem refers to the beginning and end of a trip that is not covered by public transpor-tation. In some areas this can be a difficult uphill walk or a distance that is too far to make public transportation efficient. For this reason, many of the services are located at the end stations of train or bus routes and allow users to drop the e-scooters wherever they like. The current situation, though, does not appear to provide the last-mile solution that was hoped for. Many people use the e-scooters to replace modes of transport that are already climate neutral, such as biking and walking, or use them when they are out on the town.

Unfortunately, the ability to drop the scooters all over creates an environmental impact not always accounted for when calculating the carbon footprint of these e-scooters. The pro-moters of e-scooters are particularly proud of the low carbon footprint they have. Since e-scooters run on battery power, their carbon footprint while in use is negligible. Nevertheless, there are other aspects, which are carbon intensive. As with all forms of electric transpor-tation, the carbon footprint is low only as far as the energy sources are also carbon neutral. For example, a coal-fired power plant used to generate the electricity to charge an e-scooter

has a noticeable impact on the environmental footprint of the e-scooter. In addition, the way the e-scooters are recharged is not very environmentally friendly. Large trucks drive around the city to collect the scooters wherever they are parked and bring them to a charging station before they are redistributed. The most important environmental impact, however, is the random waste that occurs due to users returning the e-scooters incorrectly. In fact, a research paper from the University of North Carolina (Hollingsworth 2019) found that due to improper disposal or parking of the e-scooters the average lifespan of a scooter is actually only one month rather than the two-year minimum required to balance the carbon impact of their production.

Considering both the last-mile solution and the impact of recharging as it is currently managed, the fact is that e-scooters are not a carbon neutral climate solution, but rather a scourge in the urban landscape.

Gretchen Chojnacki-Herbers

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The Language of Cause and Effect

A great deal of academic work involves grasping problems and suggesting solutions to these problems. However, solutions cannot be proposed until the problem has been fully analysed and this involves a thorough understanding both of the causes and the effects of those causes.

In a cause and effect relationship, one or more things happen as a result of something else.

A cause is a catalyst, a motive, or an action that brings about a reaction—or reactions. A cause instigates an effect.

An effect is a condition, occurrence, or result generated by one or more causes. Effects are outcomes.

In a cause and effect sentence, either the cause or the effect may be highlighted first.

Consider the following:
Regular maintenance is carried out.
Consequently, components last longer.
(Here the cause is depicted first)
Components last longer *due to* the regular maintenance
(Here the effect is described first).

Language proficiency can be demonstrated by the ability to express similar concepts in different ways.

To this end, the following categories provide concrete examples of the language useful in expressing causality. Note that some show the cause first; others the effect. The sequence is indicated before the sample sentence.

Verbs Expressing Causality

Cause »»» Effect
Lack of oil can *cause* a loss in power.
(lead to, result in, give rise to, bring about)

Effect »»» Cause
Scurvy is a disease that *stems from* a lack of vitamin C.
(is caused by, results from, arises from)

Nouns Expressing Causality

Cause »»» Effect
The most likely *causes* of the difficulties are poor conductivity and high voltage.

Effect »»» Cause
A *consequence* of vitamin A deficiency is blindness.
(a factor in)
Many other medications have an *influence on* cholesterol levels.

Prepositional Phrases Expressing Causality

Effect »»» Cause
Piping systems can fail *owing to* chemical attack.
(because of, as a result of, due to)

Discourse Markers Expressing Causality

Cause »»» Effect
Inflation is a persistent problem. *Therefore,* central banks must raise interest rates.
(Consequently, Thus, As a result)
Note that discourse markers are typically used at the beginning of a new sentence and followed by a comma.

Adverbial phrases expressing causality

Cause »»» Effect
The warm air rises above the surface of the sea, *thus* creating an area of low pressure.
(thereby)
Note: thus/thereby + -ing verb form

As you can see, there are ample expressions for expressing causality and it is important in academic writing and presenting to not overuse the more common words *cause* and *effect*.
For further alternatives, please click on the following.

Cheryl Stenzel