

# The present perfect continuous

## Introduction



We've been waiting here for two hours.

## Definition

The present perfect continuous is a tense that is used to talk about past and recent activities. It is used to talk about an action which started in the past and continues until now or finished recently.

## Construction

**affirmative:** subject + 'have' + 'been' + present participle  
It's been snowing.

**negative:** subject + 'have' + 'not' + 'been' + present participle  
It hasn't been snowing.

**interrogative:** 'have' + subject + 'been' + present participle  
Has it been snowing?

## Uses

It can be useful in the following situations:

Situation	Examples
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<b>When we talk about the duration of an activity</b>	<b>I've been playing</b> tennis since I was a child.  <b>It's been snowing</b> for two days.
<b>In order to focus on activity rather than completion</b>	<b>I've been drinking</b> a lot of coffee recently.
<b>To talk about recent activities</b>	"What <b>have you been doing</b> recently?" "I've <b>been going</b> to the gym quite a lot and <b>spending</b> more time with my friends."
<b>To explain something in the present. It often answers the question, 'why?', and we may be able to see a result.</b>	I'm tired because I've <b>been working</b> hard and I <b>haven't been sleeping</b> well.  "Why are your clothes so dirty?" "I've <b>been playing</b> football."
<b>To talk about temporary situations.</b>	<b>I've been driving</b> to work because of the train strike.  <b>He's been working</b> at our head office in London because they're short-staffed at the moment.

## Stative verbs

Note that we usually avoid using stative verbs in continuous forms and use the simple instead:

I've often felt that he's dishonest. ✓

I've always wanted a Porsche. ✓

He's never believed me. ✓

Have you had a lot of different jobs? ✓

I've often been feeling... ✗

I've always been wanting... ✗

He's never been believing... ✗

Have you been having..? ✗

# Words and expressions commonly used with the present perfect continuous

## 1. How long..? For/since

We use 'How long..?' to ask about duration.

How long **have** they **been learning** English?

How long **have** you **been working** in this department?

We can specify duration with either 'for' or 'since'. We use 'for' with a period of time and 'since' with a specific point in the past.

They've **been learning** English for two years.

I've **been working** in this department since February.

Some more examples:

For	Since
five minutes	yesterday
two hours	last week
days	October
three weeks	1974
a long time	I was a child
	she started working here

**Note that** in negative sentences with 'for' or 'since', there are different possible meanings between the present perfect continuous and the **present perfect simple**. The present perfect continuous is less likely to be heard. For example:

I haven't been to the theatre for ages - so I'm really excited about seeing *Phantom of the Opera* with Susan tonight.

[It is a long time between my last visit to the theatre and the present one.]

"Don't you go to the theatre on Wednesdays?"

"No, I **haven't been going** to the theatre for ages."

[I used to go to the theatre regularly but now I don't.]

I haven't spoken to Patty since Monday. [We have had no contact between Monday and today.]

I **haven't been speaking** to Patty since Monday. [When we 'are not speaking to someone', it means we are deliberately not communicating because of an argument. So this means that between Monday and today, we have chosen not to have any contact.]

## 2. Just

We use 'just' in affirmative sentences and questions to suggest a recent activity:

I've just **been reading** your report and I'm impressed by the sales figures.  
Have you just **been smoking**? I can smell cigarettes.

**Note that** these words and expressions can also be used with some other tenses.

## Simple or continuous

Use the **present perfect simple** for actions and experiences at finished but unspecified times in a current time frame and the present perfect continuous for recent or ongoing activities. Compare:

1. She's studied maths and physics but works as a yoga teacher now.  
She's **been studying** Japanese because she's going to a conference in Tokyo next month.
2. He's learned to drive at last - he passed his test last week.  
He's **been learning** to drive but it's not going well.

We also use the **present perfect simple** for actions that involve something we can count or measure. Compare:

1. I've drunk three glasses of wine this evening.  
I've **been drinking** wine all evening.
2. He's run 5km this morning.  
He's **been running** this morning.

See also the rules for **present simple** and **present continuous**.

## Examples



I've **been writing** this report for two days and I still haven't finished it.



They've been coming to this pub since they were students.



He's been looking forward to Christmas for weeks!



"How long have Katy and Anne been travelling round Europe?" "Since September. They've visited five countries so far."



"So, what have you two been doing since I last saw you?" "Well, James has been decorating the kitchen while I've been looking for a new job."



Have you just been eating those biscuits?



It's been raining.



I've been trying to call you all morning but I couldn't get through earlier. I need to talk to you about a client.



She has backache because she's been gardening.



They've been living with his parents while they decorate their flat.



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