

The English Verb

The English verb structure has five elements:

- 1) the verb
 - the simple tenses use only the verb
 - once the verb is established in the context, it may be omitted and only the auxiliaries expressed
- 2) the passive
 - formed by BE + past participle
 - indicates that the action happens to the subject
 - in a way, the subject—not the verb—is passive, it does not act but is acted upon
- 3) the progressive
 - formed by BE + present participle (*~ing*)
 - indicates that action is happening at the moment
 - also implies that the action is temporary
- 4) the perfect
 - formed by HAVE + past participle
 - expresses the action as done (note: “done” does not mean “past” – it could be present or future)
 - does not and cannot express the precise time of the action
- 5) a modal
 - these are perhaps the most important elements of the verb system
 - can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might
 - also: have to, ought to, must, and a few others
 - only one modal can be used at a time
 - most of the modals have more than one sense (epistemological, deontic, and/or dynamic)

Most of the common explanations of the verb system are either inaccurate or misleading. Concepts such as “an action that happened in the recent past and has an impact on the present” have no actual validity; they may describe some instances of usage, but the descriptors are circumstantial and not an essential part of the meaning. Moreover, they are based on subjective and variable notions such as “recent” or “impact”. Unless you have to regurgitate such dribble on a grammar quiz, you would do well to ignore such explanations.

Even the common notions of present and future need to be reconsidered. The present tenses often do not refer to the actual moment. They may express a general truth or a situation, both of which are not limited to the present moment. The present is also used to narrate past events, conveying them with a sense of immediacy; such use is common in stories and jokes. Moreover, the present can be used to refer to the future. In fact, English has no future tense. Although “will” is commonly used to express simple futurity, the future can be referred to with any modal, the simple present tense, the present progressive, and a few other forms; in fact, futurity is not indicated by the verb form, but rather by other expressions in the context (such as “tomorrow”).