

Tips For Teaching Grammar Conjugations of the English Verb

To conjugate a verb means to make a systematic list of all of its various forms. We use different forms of the same verb in situations like the change from *count* to *counts* to *counted*, and so on.

There are two general areas in which conjugation occurs; for *person* and for *tense*. Conjugation for person occurs when the verb changes form, depending on whether it is governed by a first, second, or third person subject. This gives three conjugations for any verb depending on who is acting as the subject of the verb. For example, we have *I count*, *you count*, and *he counts*. Note that only the third conjugation really shows a difference. In addition to the above, we can have the same three persons in the plural form.

While most English verbs simply do not show extensive conjugation forms for person, an exception is the verb *to be*. "To be" is conjugated for *person* as follows:

<i>to be</i>	past	present	future
First Person	was	am	will be
Second Person	were	are	will be
Third Person	was	is	will be
First Person Plural	were	are	will be
Second Person Plural	were	are	will be
Third Person Plural	were	are	will be

In addition to *person*, conjugations for *tense* are significant for all verbs. All conjugations start with the infinitive form of the verb. The infinitive is simply the *to* form of the verb. From there, the verb takes on different forms depending on the tense type and time.

<i>to count</i>	past	present	future
simple	counted	count	will count
perfect	had counted	have/has counted	will have counted

progressive	was counting	am/is/are counting	will be counting
perfect-progressive	had been counting	have/has been counting	will have been counting

The really teachable aspects of this chart have to do with the systematic quality of the changes. There is a formula that applies with exact regularity. Using this formula, we can derive each conjugation. The students can come to see something about the systematic quality of language (and the extent of unconscious knowledge that we all carry around about the system of language).

- The formula for *simple* type tense is "verb + tense form."

The tense form is *-ed* for past, nothing for present, and *will --* for future.

- The formula for *perfect* type tense is (*to have* + tense form) + past participle of the main verb.

Notice that in all of the perfect forms, the word *counted* doesn't change. It is only the first part of the conjugation that changes, the part with *to have*. It changes from *had*, to *have* or *has*, to *will have*; but *counted* stays the same in all three conjugations. In the perfect tense, the auxiliary verb is *have* and the main verb is whatever the verb is, in this case *count*. It is the auxiliary verb that carries all of the changes in form and all of the information about tense and time.

- The formula for the *progressive* type tense is (*to be* + tense form) + present participle of the main verb.

The present participle is the *-ing* form of the verb. Whichever tense time, the verb *count* is always in the *-ing* form. It is only the auxiliary that changes form according to the tense time. Again, it is the auxiliary that carries most of the information about tense.

- The formula for the *perfect progressive* type tense is [(*to have* + tense form) + past participle of *to be*] + present participle of the main verb.

Only the form of *to have* changes in this conjugation. The past participle of *to be*, i.e., *been*, remains the same in each conjugation, as does the present participle of the main verb, in this case, *count*.

It should be noted that this formula pattern is totally systematic for the conjugation chart, but is not so for the actual usage of the verbs in everyday language. Linguists will correctly point out that the present form can be used to mean the future (as in "Tomorrow, we go back to the courthouse and *count* the ballots again"). The actual usage of verbs appears to be a lot less regular than the above chart of conjugations. Nonetheless, mastering the verb conjugations gives students a real sense of accomplishment. It is concrete knowledge of language, and it provides for clear directions for both teaching and testing the material.

Robert Einarsson. <http://www.atteg.org/grammar/tips/t12.htm>