

DESCRIBING **PROLONGED ACTION IN THE PAST** USING **USED TO + SIMPLE VERB**

Used to + simple verb is used to express action which was **true in the past**, but is **no longer true in the present**.

Example:

- I **used to live** in New York.

From this sentence the listener (or reader) knows that:

1. I lived in New York (in the past)
2. I no longer live in New York.

Function

The function of **used to** is to:

- **divide** present action from past action

Use the *simple verb* to express the action.

This action took place over a **prolonged** period of time.

This action, however, is no longer taking place in the present.

Do not use **used to** when discussing (i) duration of action, or (ii) the moment/time when an action occurred, such as *yesterday*, or *last year*, or *in 2001*.

Example

- X: I used to work for the Office of the State's Attorney. ¹
 Y: Oh, really? How long **did you work** there? ²
 X: **I worked** there for two years.

Use the *simple past* to express *duration* of action. (worked)

Use the *simple past* to specify when a past action occurred. (worked)

Correct: I **used to work** for the State's Attorney **when I was** younger.
 I **used to work** for the State's Attorney **when I lived** downtown.

The qualifying actions:

- when I was younger
- when I lived

both describe **prolonged** periods of time. You may use such expressions with *used to*.

¹ When making the general statement, "I used to work," A simply tells B about something that was true in the past (working at the State's Attorney's office) but which *is not true today* (working at the State's Attorney's office). "Used to" conveys this meaning.

² Note that to inquiry "**how long**" – Y must use the simple past, not "used to." X must answer with **simple past**, as well. When asking about "**duration**" – you cannot use "used to."

Incorrect: I used to work for the Office of the State's Attorney for two years.

I used to work for the Office of the State's Attorney in 1994.

The source of error is in the time frames mentioned:

- *for two years* – expresses duration
- *in 1994* – sets a fixed moment in the past

Correct:

- I **worked** for the Office of the State's Attorney **for two years**.
- I **worked** for the Office of the State's Attorney **in 1994**.
- I **worked** for the Office of the State's Attorney **from 1993 to 1995**.

RULE SUMMARY:

- ✓ Use the *simple past* to express –
 - (past) duration
 - a fixed moment in the past
- ✓ Use **used to** in order to **divide** past action from present action. Nothing more.

The following sentences also divide the past from the present.

- He **used to smoke**. (He does not smoke anymore.)
- She **used to play** the piano. (She doesn't play anymore.)
- He **didn't use to smoke**. (He smokes now.)
- She **didn't use to** play the piano. (She plays now.)

Form

Prolonged, but completed past action is constructed as follows:

SUBJECT	+	USED TO	+	SIMPLE VERB
He		used to		smoke
My partner		used to		work every weekend

- The past **time** frame of the action is expressed in the **d** of **used**.
- The **repetition**, or **prolonged** period of the action is expressed in **use to**.
- The **action** itself is expressed in the **simple verb**.

Interrogatives:

- **Did** you **use to** work for the government?
- What **did** you **use to** do there?

The past tense auxiliary **did** is used with **use to**.

Negatives:

- I **didn't use to** understand spoken English.
- He **didn't use to** be so nervous.

The implications of the above two sentences are:

- I understand spoken English now.
- He's very nervous these days.

Tag Questions:

- They didn't use to complain about our fees, **did they?**
- He used to work on the fifth floor, **didn't he?**

Note how you can use the **used to + simple verb** construction to answer yes/no questions clearly and fluently:

- Do you smoke cigarettes?
No, I don't, but I **used to**.
- Do you take English lessons?
No, but I **used to**. Now I try to study on my own. I'm too busy for lessons these days.

DO NOT CONFUSE:

1. used to + simple verb
2. BE used to + verb/ing

The meanings expressed are very different. See the **examples** below:

1. I used to live in London.
2. I am used to living in London.

In example sentence (1), the **meaning** of the sentence is:

- I lived in London in the past
- I no longer live in London

In example sentence (2), the **meaning** of the sentence is:

- I now live in London
- The life in London is very familiar to me. I am accustomed to my lifestyle in London.

The **forms** of these two expressions are also **distinct**:

1. I **used to live** in London. (used to + simple verb)
2. I **am used to living** in London. (BE used to + verb/ing)
 - The time is held in BE (am).
 - The action is expressed in verb + ing.³

HIGH-FREQUENCY FIXED EXPRESSIONS RELATED TO 'BE USED TO'

get used to⁴ / can't get used to

- At first it was difficult for me to take classes in the evening, but **I've gotten used to it**.
- Mr. & Mrs. Smith were born and raised in a small town in Iowa. They moved to New York City two years ago. Mrs. Smith loves the big city and never wants to live in a small town again. Mr. Smith, on the other hand, just **can't get used to living and working** in such a big, crowded city. He dreams of going back to Iowa to live.

³ living

⁴ **GET** is often used as a replacement for **BE**. **GET** expresses **transformation**, or **change** from A to B. For this reason, native speakers use the verb get in many situations.

GRAMMAR EXERCISES USING *USED TO*

Directions: Express the following situations using *used to* and a *simple verb*.

Example

Jack was very ambitious when he was young. He's 88 years old now.

Jack used to be very ambitious.

1. When Frank lived in his native country, he had lunch around 2:30 in the afternoon. Now that he works in the firm's American office, he has lunch around noon on most days.
2. They were our clients for many years. We lost them when they merged with another company.
3. Elissa was a partner in a law firm during the 80s and 90s. Now she teaches law in a university.
4. When Joe and I joined this firm, he was very easygoing. I guess he's changed.
5. Their productivity level was very low under the old management style. Then they re-engineered their production model.
6. Under former management the worker-management relations were stable and amicable. Now they have strikes all the time.
7. Ten years ago their entire market lay within 150 miles of their plant. Now they export to three different continents.
8. Their pension funds were fully funded until recently.
9. You can file a lot of motions electronically in that court. You couldn't do that when I first started practicing.

ANSWERS
GRAMMAR EXERCISES
USING USED TO

Directions: Express the following situations using *used to* and a *simple verb*.

1. When Frank lived in his native country, he had lunch around 2:30 in the afternoon. Now that he works in the firm's American office, he has lunch around noon on most days.

Frank used to have lunch around 2:30.
Frank didn't use to have lunch at noon.

2. They were our clients for many years. We lost them when they merged with another company.

They used to be our clients.

3. Elissa was a partner in a law firm during the 80s and 90s. Now she teaches law in a university.

Elissa used to be a partner in a law firm.

4. When Joe and I joined this firm, he was very easygoing. I guess he's changed.

Joe used to be very easygoing.
Joe didn't use to be so nervous and uptight.

5. Their productivity level was very low under the old management style. Then they re-engineered their production model.

They used to have a very low productivity level.

6. Under former management the worker-management relations were stable and amicable. Now they have strikes all the time.

They didn't use to have strikes (all the time).
They used to have stable and amicable worker-management relations.

7. Ten years ago their entire market lay within 150 miles of their plant. Now they export to three different continents.

Their entire market used to lie within 150 miles of their plant.
They didn't use to export.

8. Their pension funds were fully funded until recently.

Their pension funds used to be fully funded.
Their pension funds didn't use to be under-funded.

9. You can file a lot of motions electronically in that court. You couldn't do that when I first started practicing.

You didn't use to be able to file motions electronically in that court.
You used to have to file everything in person.