

Storytelling in English: Narrative Tenses Made Simple

Tell stories people remember

EPISODE 11 • LEVEL B1-B2

Episode summary

- Every story has four beats: setup, build, peak, release. No plot, no story — just a list of facts.
- Past simple carries the main events: “The lights went out.” Past continuous paints the scene: “It was raining.”
- Background plus interruption is the master pattern: “It was raining when the phone rang.”
- Past perfect reaches into the deeper past for flashbacks: “I was nervous because I had never flown before.” Use it like salt.
- Show, don’t tell: “My cheeks hurt from smiling” beats “I was happy.” One detail and the listener feels it.
- Hook them with the first line, spend spotlight words rarely, and end on the feeling: “We laughed about it for the rest of the trip.”

What’s inside this PDF

20 key words • narrative tenses • Say It Better upgrades • 3 practice exercises

Key Vocabulary

20 words from this episode — learn them, then use them this week

1. plot

the sequence of events in a story.

> The plot has four beats — setup, build, peak, release.

2. climax

the most exciting moment of the story.

> The climax came when the lights went out.

3. twist

a surprising turn in the story.

> The twist was that the stranger was my old teacher.

4. narrator

the person telling the story.

> In your stories, you are the narrator — own it.

5. flashback

a jump to an earlier time.

> Use the past perfect for a quick flashback.

6. moral

the lesson of the story.

> End with a small moral, not a lecture.

7. hook

an opening line that grabs attention.

> Start with a surprising line, not “One day I went to...”

8. scene

where and when the story happens.

> Paint the scene before the events start.

9. suspense

excited waiting to know what happens.

> Build suspense slowly, then hit the peak.

10. peak

the highest, most intense moment.

> Save the twist for the peak.

11. release

the calm ending after the peak.

> The release beat gives the ending its feeling.

12. detail

one small specific thing that makes it real.

> One detail, and the listener feels it.

13. vivid

clear and bright, like a movie.

> Vivid stories are remembered; flat ones are not.

14. meanwhile

at the same time as something else.

> Meanwhile, the bus was already leaving.

15. suddenly

quickly and unexpectedly.

> “Suddenly, the lights went out.”

16. background

what was happening around the main events.

> Past continuous paints the background.

17. interruption

something that breaks into the scene.

> Past simple carries the interruption.

18. direct speech

quoting the exact words someone said.

> “And then he said, ‘Run.’” — direct speech is a close-up shot.

19. timeline

the order of events in time.

> Keep your timeline clear — one flashback adds depth, three add confusion.

20. storyteller

a person who tells stories well.

> A confident storyteller makes a simple story shine.

The Four-Beat Story

setup, build, peak, release

Setup: past continuous

“We were walking home...” — paint the scene first.

Build: past simple

“...when it started raining.” — the events march forward.

Flashback: past perfect

“I had never seen rain like that.” — the deeper past, used like salt.

Peak: one spotlight

“Suddenly, the lights went out.” — rare words stay powerful.

Release: end on feeling

“We laughed about it for the rest of the trip.”

Say It Better — 10 upgrades

☐ “I went to the store. I bought milk.”

☐ “So there I was, holding a bag of milk, watching my bus drive away.”

☐ “It rained and the phone rang.”

☐ “It was raining when the phone rang.”

☐ “I was nervous. I never flew before.”

☐ “I was nervous because I had never flown before.”

☐ “Then something happened.”

☐ “Suddenly, the lights went out.”

☐ “He told me to run.”

☐ “And then he said, ‘Run.’”

☐ “That is it.” (ending)

☐ “We laughed about it for the rest of the trip.”

☐ Telling the peak in flat past tense only.

☐ “So I am standing there, and he just walks away.” — the historic present makes it alive.

☐ “The food was good.”

☐ “The curry was so rich I ordered a second plate before finishing the first.”

☐ “The trip was long.”

☐ “We were on the bus for nine hours, and by the end, strangers were sharing snacks like family.”

☐ “I was happy.”

☐ “I was smiling so much my cheeks hurt.”

Practice Time

3 exercises — do them today, not “someday”

Exercise 1 — Fill in the blank

Word bank: flashback • climax • plot • twist • narrator

1. Use the past perfect for a quick _____: “I had never flown before.”
2. Build slowly, then hit the _____ hard — one per story is enough.
3. The _____ has four beats: setup, build, peak, release.
4. A good _____ makes listeners gasp — save it for the peak.
5. In your stories, you are the _____ — own it.

Exercise 2 — Vivid it up

Turn each flat line into a story line (answers below):

1. “I went to the store. I bought milk.” > Say it better:
2. “It rained and the phone rang.” > Say it better:
3. “I was nervous. I never flew before.” > Say it better:

Exercise 3 — The four sentence story

Tell a small moment from your week in four sentences — setup, build, peak, release.

“Yesterday I was waiting for the bus. It was raining and I had no umbrella. Suddenly, a stranger shared hers with me. We talked all the way home.” Tell three stories this week.

- A small surprise from your week.
- A trip that did not go as planned.
- A funny misunderstanding.

Answer key

Ex 1: 1 flashback • 2 climax • 3 plot • 4 twist • 5 narrator

Ex 2: 1 “So there I was, holding a bag of milk, watching my bus drive away.” 2 “It was raining when the phone rang.” 3 “I was nervous because I had never flown before.”