Past Tenses

CEFR C2 · The past at the limits: aspect, modality, corpus and style

WS1 Aspect, Remoteness & Modality · WS2 Corpus, Register & Variation · WS3 Style, Voice & Tense-Shifting · WS4 Scholarly Analysis & Writing · Answer Key

Worksheet 1: Aspect, Remoteness & Modality

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C2 (CEFR)

Reference: The Past Form as "Remoteness"

Many linguists treat the English past form as a marker of **remoteness** — from present time, from reality, or from the hearer (politeness) — rather than of past time alone. This unifies past-time reference, the unreal conditional, backshift, and tentative modality (*could, might, would, should* as "past" of can/may/will/shall). The past perfect adds a second layer of remoteness (double distancing).

Remoteness type	Realisation	Example
Temporal	past simple	She **left** an hour ago.
Unreal (present)	past for hypothetical	If I **were** you…
Unreal (past)	past perfect	Had I **known**…
Politeness / tentative	past modal	I **wondered** if you **could** help.
Double remoteness	would have + pp	I **would have gone**, had I been asked.

Part A – Theoretical Analysis

1. Using the notion of **remoteness**, explain how a single past-tense morphology can encode past time, unreality, and politeness. Why is this analysis more economical than positing three homophonous "pasts"?
2. "I **was hoping** you might reconsider" is more tentative than "I **hope** you might reconsider". Account for the politeness effect in terms of remoteness and aspect.
3. Distinguish the two readings of "If she **left** now, she'd catch it" vs "If she **had left** then, she'd have caught it", and explain how the past perfect layers a second remoteness.

Score: _____ / 20

Worksheet 2: Corpus, Register & Variation

Name: _____ *Date:* _____ *Level: C2 (CEFR)*

Reference: What Corpora Show About the Past

Corpora reveal that AmE often uses the past simple where BrE uses the present perfect (*already/just/yet*); that **would**-narration and **used to** pattern by genre; that the subjunctive *were* is receding in informal speech (*if I was you*); that past-perfect frequency correlates with narrative complexity; and that the historic present competes with the past in oral storytelling. Register and dialect leave measurable traces.

Pattern	Corpus tendency
preterite vs perfect	AmE admits *I already ate*; BrE prefers *I've already eaten*
if I were vs *if I was*	*were* formal/written; *was* common in speech
would-narration	memoir, reminiscence; literary register
past perfect density	higher in complex/literary narrative
historic present	oral narrative, jokes, commentary

Part A – Diagnose Register / Variety

#	Sentence	Register / variety & evidence
1	"I already spoke to him about it."	
2	"If I was rich, I'd travel the world."	
3	"Every summer, we'd pile into the old car and drive north."	
4	"So she turns to me and she goes, 'No way.'"	

Part B – Standardise / Localise

1. Give the BrE-standard equivalent of "Did you eat yet?" _____
2. Give the formal written equivalent of "if I was you" _____

Part C – Register-Corpus Map

Place each in its most likely corpus: *had long maintained · I already told you · if he were to resign · we'd spend hours there · so I walk in and he goes*

Corpus	Forms
Formal / literary narrative	
Reminiscence / memoir	
Hypothetical / formal	
Informal / AmE spoken	

Oral storytelling	

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 3: Style, Voice & Tense-Shifting

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C2 (CEFR)

Reference: The Past as a Stylistic Instrument

Writers exploit past forms for effect: the pluperfect can open a narrative *in medias res* then flash back; a shift from past to historic present injects immediacy; the imperfective (past continuous) suspends time for description; free indirect discourse fuses a character's past-tense thought with narration. Control — legible shift, recoverable norm — is the C2 mark.

Effect	Device	Example
Flashback / depth	past perfect	He **had never told** anyone the truth.
Immediacy (shift)	past → historic present	…and then she **turns** and **leaves**.
Suspended description	past continuous	The snow **was falling**; nothing **moved**.
Free indirect thought	backshifted past	Why **had** she agreed? She **couldn't** say.
Iterative memory	would / used to	On Sundays they **would gather**…

Part A – Name the Effect

1. "The house was silent. She had been here before." _____
2. "He opens the door. The room is empty. He knew it would be." _____
3. "Rain was falling; the streets were empty; nothing stirred." _____
4. "Had she made a terrible mistake? There was no way back now." _____

Part B – Shift with Control

Rewrite each, introducing the device named; note the recoverable norm.

#	Neutral (past simple)	Shifted version + effect
1	She entered the room and everyone stopped talking. (→ historic present)	
2	He regretted his decision; he never told anyone why. (→ past perfect flashback)	
3	She wondered whether she was right. (→ free indirect thought)	

Part C – Pastiche

Write a short paragraph (4–5 sentences) that opens with a past-perfect flashback, moves through past-simple events, and shifts once into the historic present for a climactic moment. Annotate each shift in a line beneath.

#	Line
1	

2	
3	
4	
5	
6	

Score: _____ / 30

Worksheet 4: Scholarly Analysis & Writing

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C2 (CEFR)

Part A – Critical Text Analysis

> The past tense, we are told, is for what is over; and yet in English it does much that has nothing to do with time gone by. It builds our conditionals: were I to leave now, I should still be late. It lends our requests their courtesy: I wondered whether you might spare a moment. It even reaches, through the pluperfect, beneath the past itself, to the past-before-the-past — the layer where regret lives, in the had-onlys and the if-I-had-knowns. What the form encodes, then, is not pastness so much as distance: from now, from fact, from the bluntness of the bare request.

1. Identify every past form that does **not** refer to past time, and classify each (unreal conditional, tentative/polite, unreal past/regret).
2. "were I to leave now" is an inverted unreal conditional. Rewrite it with *if* and analyse the register and the modality of "should still be late".
3. The writer argues the past encodes "distance, not pastness". Evaluate this remoteness thesis against a purely temporal account of tense.
4. Analyse how the passage's own use of the past — its conditionals, its pluperfects — enacts the claim it makes.

Part B – Extended Scholarly Writing

Write the opening two paragraphs (220–260 words) of a scholarly essay on: "The English past tense marks remoteness, not merely time." Requirements — include and underline: (1) one **unreal conditional** using a past form; (2) one **tentative/polite past**; (3) one **pluperfect** used for real earlier past; (4) one precise **metalinguistic term** (remoteness, backshift, pluperfect, counterfactual, aspect) used correctly; (5) two **epistemic hedges** calibrated to each claim; (6) one **conjunct** that maps the argument's logic precisely.

#	Line
1	
2	
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7	
8	

Features: _____ / 6 Word count: _____ Score: _____ / 35

Answer Key & Teacher Notes

For teacher use only — C2 Level, Past Tenses

Worksheet 1 – Part A (model)

1 The past form signals distance on some scale; context fixes which — temporal distance (real past), modal distance (unreal/hypothetical), or interpersonal distance (politeness). One morpheme with a unified "remoteness" meaning is more economical than three accidentally identical pasts, and it predicts the overlaps (e.g. backshift as temporal distance from the reporting now). · 2 "was hoping" adds temporal/modal remoteness plus imperfective aspect (an unfinished, non-committal frame), distancing the speaker from a bald present request and so sounding more tentative and polite. · 3 "left" = present/future counterfactual (remote from present fact); "had left" adds a further past layer, making it a past counterfactual (remote from past fact) — double distancing, hence the past-perfect + would-have apodosis.

Worksheet 2 – Part A (model)

1 AmE informal — preterite with *already*. · 2 informal — *if I was* (indicative for the subjunctive). · 3 reminiscence/memoir — habitual *would*. · 4 oral storytelling — historic present with quotative *goes*.

Worksheet 2 – Part B (model)

1 "Have you eaten yet?" · 2 "if I were you".

Worksheet 2 – Part C

Formal/literary: had long maintained. · Reminiscence: we'd spend hours there. · Hypothetical/formal: if he were to resign. · Informal/AmE spoken: I already told you. · Oral storytelling: so I walk in and he goes.

Worksheet 3 – Part A

1 past perfect flashback (depth/backstory). · 2 shift to historic present (immediacy) with a past-perfect/backshift touch ("knew it would be"). · 3 past continuous — suspended description. · 4 free indirect thought (inverted pluperfect question).

Worksheet 3 – Part B (model)

1 She enters the room and everyone stops talking. (norm: past narration) · 2 He regretted his decision; he had never told anyone why. (pluperfect deepens the backstory) · 3 Was she right? She couldn't be sure. (free indirect — the narrator voices her thought).

Assess intentionality: the shift must be legible and the unmarked tense recoverable; a tense that drifts without effect is an error, not a device.

Worksheet 4 – Part A (model)

1 "were I to leave now" (unreal conditional); "I should still be late" (hypothetical consequence); "I wondered whether you might…" (tentative/polite); "had-onlys / if-I-had-knowns", "reaches… beneath the past" (unreal past / regret via pluperfect). · 2 "If I were to leave now, I should still be late." The inverted form and *should* (for *would*, 1st person) are formal/BrE; the modality is hypothetical- consequential. · 3 A strong answer credits the remoteness thesis for unifying the non-temporal uses (conditionals, politeness, regret) that a purely temporal account must treat as exceptions, while noting temporal reference remains the default, context-selected value. · 4 The passage performs its claim: it deploys an inverted conditional, a tentative past, and stacked pluperfects, so its prose demonstrates the past encoding distance rather than mere past time.

Worksheet 4 – Part B: Marking Rubric

Criterion	Descriptor at C2	Marks
Unreal conditional	Past-form hypothetical, correct	0–6
Tentative past	Politeness use, controlled	0–5
Pluperfect (real)	Earlier-past use, distinct from unreal	0–5
Metalinguistic accuracy	Term used correctly, no overclaiming	0–5
Epistemic calibration	Two hedges matched to claim strength	0–5
Argument & length	220–260 words; contestable claim developed	0–5

The C2 benchmark is conscious orchestration: a student who uses an inverted unreal conditional and can explain, in a footnote, how remoteness underlies both it and a polite request has demonstrated mastery.