**Russian Past Tense - Russian Verbs**

The past tense in Russian, like any language, is one of the most important things to learn. The past tense allows you tell stories, and discuss events that have already happened. Forming the past tense verbs in Russian is actually quite easy. In fact it is one of the simplest conjugations to remember in Russian.

**Forming the Russian Past Tense**

In Russian, the past tense is formed quite differently than the present tense. In the present tense we are concerned about the person who is talking (ie 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person). In the past tense however we are concerned about the gender of the subject.

To do this we use the grammatical gender of the subject. (This is the word that is in the nominative case.) Often the subject is a pronoun, especially when you are talking about yourself. If the subject is a real person then you would use select the masculine or feminine gender as appropriate. If the subject is plural you select the plural form.

Here are the verb endings you can use for each situation:

Masculine: **-л**  
Feminine: **-ла**  
Neuter: **-ло**  
Plural: **-ли**

And here is a sample conjugation for the word **Знать** (to know):

Masculine: **Знал**  
Feminine: **Знала**  
Neuter: **Знало**  
Plural: **Знали**

**Examples of the Russian past tense.**

**Я знал** - I knew (man speaking)

**Я знала** - I knew (woman speaking)

**Он знал** - He knew

**Она знала** - She knew

**Оно знало** - It knew

**Они знали** - They knew

**Он не знал** - He didn’t know

**Она не знала** - She didn’t know

**Все мечтали пожать ему руку.** - Everyone dreamed to shake his hand

**Was - ‘Be’ in the Past Tense**

From previous lessons you will remember that there is no word in Russian that corresponds to the English word ‘is’. It is simply omitted. In the Russian Past Tense however there is a word, and it corresponds to the English word ‘was’. It comes from **Быть** (to be). (Note the irregular stress pattern in the feminine when using this verb.)

**Я был** - I was (man speaking)

**Я была** - I was (woman speaking)

**Он был** - He was

**Она была** - She was

**Оно было** - It was

**Они были** - They were

Note the unsual stress patterns when used in the negative. The stress moves to the word 'не' except in the feminine.

**Я не был** - I was not (man speaking).

**Я не была** - I was not (woman speaking).

**Оно не было** - It was not.

**Они не были** - They were not.

**The Perfective Aspect**

If you have read the previous grammar lesson about aspects in Russian you will realise that they are important when using the past tense, and that you need to select the appropriate [aspect](https://www.russianlessons.net/grammar/verbs_aspect.php). Remember that the perfective is used for actions that are completed only once, and are not ongoing. In almost all other cases the imperfective is used. Refer to the page on [aspects](https://www.russianlessons.net/grammar/verbs_aspect.php) for more detailed information.

The perfective aspect conjugates in the same was as the imperfective aspect, so the endings are the same. Here are some examples...

**Я купил кофе** - I bought a coffee (man speaking)

**Я купила кофе** - I bought a coffee (woman speaking)

**Я пошла домой** - I went home.

**Мы пошли домой** - We went home.

**Reflexive Verbs in the Past Tense**

Reflexive verbs are conjugated in almost exactly the same way as above, except that they still maintain the reflexive endings. Refer to the sections on reflexive verbs for more information.

Masculine: **-лся**  
Feminine: **-лась**  
Neuter: **-лось**  
Plural: **-лись**

Examples - Одевать (to dress):

**Я одевался** - I dressed myself (man speaking)

**Я одевалась** - I dressed myself (woman speaking)

**Они одевались** - They dressed themselves.

**Notable Irregular Verbs**

The Russian verb **Идти** (to go on foot) has a very irregular past tense.

Masculine: Шёл  
Feminine: Шла  
Neuter: Шло  
Plural: Шли  
[See all conjugations.](https://www.russianlessons.net/verbs/verbs.php?verb=28)

**Мочь** (can, to be able) is also irregular.

Masculine: Мог  
Feminine: Могла  
Neuter: Могло  
Plural: Могли  
[See all conjugations.](http://www.russianlessons.net/verbs/verbs.php?verb=5)

Other verbs that don’t end in -ть are also commonly irregular in the past tense and it’s worth checking your verb book. (If you don't have one then we recommend [Big Silver Book of Russian Verbs](http://www.amazon.com/gp/redirect.html?link_code=ur2&tag=russialessonn-20&camp=1789&creative=9325&location=%2Fgp%2Fproduct%2F007143299X%2Fsr%3D1-1%2Fqid%3D1155256225%2Fref%3Dsr_1_1%3Fie%3DUTF8%26s%3Dbooks))

**Conclusion**

The Russian past tense is not too easy to master. In fact forming the different conjunctions is actually quite easy. The more difficult part is deciding which [aspect](https://www.russianlessons.net/grammar/verbs_aspect.php) to use, and for this we recommend that you have a look at our section on verb [aspects](https://www.russianlessons.net/grammar/verbs_aspect.php).