

Use the past simple with a past time reference

Students often misuse the simple past tense. Use simple past only when you say when something happened in the past. You can, for example, use a time expression (e.g. last week, last year), a date (on the 18th of last month), a prepositional phrase (e.g. in high school) or a clause (e.g. when I was young) to say when something happened.

I met him last week.

They got married on the 18th of last month.

His father died last year.

He was very popular in high school.

I had a strange experience when I was young.

Note that the simple past tense is not normally used when there is no time reference.

For example, we do not normally say:

I met him. OR His father died.

In such cases, we use the present perfect tense.

I have met him. (Here the speaker doesn't state exactly when that happened.)

His father has died.

Once you have specified a time period, you can continue to use the past simple in a paragraph. Read the paragraph given below.

Mark was strolling through the woods one sunny morning when he noticed a bird stumbling awkwardly. It was dragging the feathers of one wing over the ground, while it flapped the other wing. Mark wanted to help the bird, which appeared to be hurt. He hurried after it.

Here the first sentence of the paragraph indicates that the action took place sometime in the past. Therefore, we continue to use the past simple in the remaining sentences.