Past habits

Past habits are actions that happened repeatedly over a period in the past. We can talk about them using ***used to* + bare infinitive, *would* + bare infinitive** or the **past simple**. *Used to* normally indicates that the past habit no longer happens and can also describe past states that are no longer true.

Past habits with *used to*, *would* and the past simple

Used to for past habits

We commonly use ***used to*** followed by a **bare infinitive** verb to describe past habits:

- *I **used to play** the violin at school. (I no longer play the violin)*
- *My brother **used to call** me every Sunday. (He no longer calls me every Sunday)*
- *We **used to go** to Spain for our holidays. (We no longer go to Spain for our holidays)*

In questions and negative sentences, use ***use to*** after ***did*** or ***didn't*** rather than *used to*. The pronunciation is normally the same, so the difference is mainly noticeable in writing:

- ***Did** you **use to** live here?*
- *I **didn't use to** live here.*

Would for past habits

Would + bare infinitive can also describe repeated past actions, especially when a past time or situation has already been established. It is particularly common in stories and when reminiscing about the past:

- *When I was younger, my mother **would bake** apple crumble on Sundays.*
- *When we stayed with my grandparents, we **would walk** to the village every morning.*
- *When we were teenagers, we **would cycle** for hours after school.*

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Past simple for past habits

The **past simple** can also describe past habits when the context shows that an action was repeated. Unlike *used to*, the past simple does not itself emphasise the repeated nature of the action or make it as clear that the habit has stopped:

- *I **played** the violin at school.*
- *We **went** to Spain every summer when I was a child.*
- *When I was younger, my mother **baked** apple crumble on Sundays.*

When describing **one completed past event**, we use the **past simple** rather than *used to* or *would*:

- *My brother **visited** Iceland in 2021.*

Past states with used to, would and the past simple

Used to for past states

Use ***used to*** to describe states that existed in the past but are no longer true. *Would* is not normally used to describe a state that remained true throughout a single period in the past:

- *I **used to have** blond hair when I was a child.*
- *My sister **used to be** in the Girl Guides.*
- *My cousin **used to believe** in fairies.*

Would for past states

We do not normally use ***would*** to describe a single state that continued throughout a period in the past. In this situation, we normally use ***used to***:

- ❌ *When I was younger, I **would live** in London.*
- ✅ *When I was younger, I **used to live** in London.*
- ❌ *She **would believe** in ghosts when she was a child.*
- ✅ *She **used to believe** in ghosts when she was a child.*

However, ***would*** can describe states that occurred repeatedly on separate occasions or during recurring periods. In these cases, the context shows that the state became true again each time:

- *At the end of each month, we **would have** very little money left.*
- *On winter mornings, the roads **would** often **be** icy.*
- *Whenever we visited him, my grandfather **would seem** unhappy.*
- *After long meetings, I **would** often **feel** exhausted.*

The important distinction is therefore between one continuing past state and a state that was repeated on different occasions. ***Would*** is not normally used for the first, but it can be used for the second.

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Past simple for past states

The **past simple** can also describe a past state, particularly when the focus is on the time or period in which the state existed. It tells us that the state was true at that time, but does not by itself tell us whether it is still true now. In contrast, ***used to*** normally emphasises the difference between the past and the present and suggests that the state is no longer true, for example:

- *My sister **lived** in China during Covid.* (the focus is on where she lived **during that period**; she may still live in China)
- *My sister **used to live** in China.* (the focus is on a **past situation that has changed**; she presumably does not live there now)

Used to, would and the past simple: summary

Situation	*Used to*	*Would*	Past simple
Repeated past actions	Describes a recurring past state as a general pattern that no longer occurs: *We **used to go** to Spain every summer.*	Describes repeated actions, especially when the past context has already been established: *Every summer, we **would go** to Spain.*	Describes repeated actions when repetition is clear from the context: *We **went** to Spain every summer.*
A state during a single past period	Describes a past state that is no longer true: *I **used to live** in London when I was younger.*	Not normally used for a state that remained true throughout one past period: ✗ *I **would live** in London when I was younger.*	Describes the state during that past period without necessarily saying whether it is still true: *I **lived** in London during the 1990s.*
States repeated on separate occasions	Can describe the general past situation if it is no longer true: *We **used to have** very little money at the end of each month.*	Can describe a state that became true repeatedly on separate occasions: *At the end of each month, we **would have** very little money left.*	Can describe repeated states when the recurring context makes this clear: *At the end of each month, we **had** very little money left.*

Common mistakes with past habits

Used to vs *be used to* and *get used to*

***Used to* + bare infinitive** describes a past habit or state. ***Be used to* + noun/-ing** means to be accustomed to something, while ***get used to* + noun/-ing** means to become accustomed to it.

- ❌ *He's not **used to drive** on the left.*
- ✅ *He's not **used to driving** on the left.* (he is not accustomed to this)
- ❌ *People **are used to see** police officers with guns in train stations.*
- ✅ *People **are used to seeing** police officers with guns in train stations.* (people are accustomed to this)
- ❌ *I can't **get used to wake** up at this time.*
- ✅ *I can't **get used to waking** up at this time.* (I cannot become accustomed to this)
- ❌ *You need to **get used to work** with Nathan.*
- ✅ *You need to **get used to working** with Nathan.* (you need to become accustomed to this)

Used to after *did*

A common mistake is to use ***used to*** after ***did*** or ***didn't***. Use ***use to*** instead:

- ❌ *Did she **used to** work here?*
- ✅ *Did she **use to** work here?*
- ❌ *We didn't **used to** eat out much.*
- ✅ *We didn't **use to** eat out much.*

Would with a state during a single past period

A common mistake is to use ***would*** simply to replace ***used to*** for a state that remained true throughout a single period in the past. Use ***used to*** when the state was generally or continuously true throughout that period:

- ❌ My grandparents **would own** a small farm when I was a child.
- ✅ My grandparents **used to own** a small farm when I was a child.
- ❌ Laura **would like** jazz when she was a teenager.
- ✅ Laura **used to like** jazz when she was a teenager.

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