Understanding and Using the Past Perfect Tense 'had had'

L1-L2 ESOL

Name _____ Date _____

Explaining why we use the past perfect form 'had had' can be difficult with native English speakers let alone ESOL learners. I hope this will help those of you who, when faced with the inevitable 'why' will find this useful.

Why had had?

The term 'had had' is used in English to show that one action was completed before another action in the past.

The term 'had had' emphasises the sequence of past events, showing that one happened before another.

Understanding "had had" becomes easier when you see it in context. It is an example of the past perfect tense. Key rules are shown below.

Past Perfect Usage

- The past perfect tense is used to talk about an action that was completed before another action in the past.
- "Had" is the auxiliary (helping) verb, and the second "had" is the past participle of the main verb "to have."

Structure

Subject + had + past participle (had)

Example

Before the teacher arrived, John had had his breakfast.

Here, "had had" indicates that John's breakfast (the first action) was completed before the teacher arrived (the second action).

Common Contexts

"Had had" often appears in situations involving discussions, recounting experiences, or narrating past events.

Example:

"By the time they realised the mistake, they had had several chances to fix it."

Clarity

Using "had had" can be confusing, but it becomes clearer when we understand that the first "had" sets up the past perfect tense, while the second "had" is the main verb.

Key words:

Sequence	**Main verb**	**Past**	**Context**
Before	**Auxiliary verb**	**Set up**	**Recounting**

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Read these examples carefully and consider why 'had had' has been used.

1. By the time she found the error, she had had multiple opportunities to correct it.

2. After the guests left, we realised we had had enough food for everyone.

3. They had had a long conversation before making the decision.

4. Before the new manager arrived, the team had had several meetings about the changes.

5. By the time I reached the station, the train had had a delay and still hadn't arrived.

6. She had had a rough day at work before she came home and relaxed.

7. He had had doubts about the plan, but he decided to go along with it anyway.

8. After the storm passed, we saw the damage it had had on the neighbourhood.

9. We had had that car for over a decade before we finally decided to sell it.

10. By the time the movie started, they had had enough time to buy snacks and find their seats.

These sentences show how "had had" is used to indicate that one past event occurred before another past event. Before you read on, write explanations below to show your understanding.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.

Here are explanations for each of the "had had" examples:

By the time she found the error, she had had multiple opportunities to correct it.

Explanation: Before she discovered the error, she had already experienced several moments when she could have fixed it. "Had had" shows that these opportunities occurred before the discovery.

After the guests left, we realised we had had enough food for everyone.

Explanation: Once the guests were gone, it became clear that before they left, there was sufficient food. The "had had" emphasises that this realisation was about the past before the guests departed.

They had had a long conversation before making the decision.

Explanation: Prior to deciding, they engaged in a lengthy discussion. "Had had" indicates that the conversation took place before the decision.

Before the new manager arrived, the team had had several meetings about the changes.

Explanation: The meetings occurred before the manager's arrival. "Had had" highlights that the meetings were completed prior to the arrival.

By the time I reached the station, the train had had a delay and still hadn't arrived.

Explanation: Before the speaker arrived at the station, the train had already experienced a delay. "Had had" indicates the delay happened earlier in the past.

She had had a rough day at work before she came home and relaxed.

Explanation: Her difficult day occurred before she got home. "Had had" emphasises that the rough day was completed before her relaxation.

He had had doubts about the plan, but he decided to go along with it anyway.

Explanation: Before agreeing to the plan, he experienced doubts. "Had had" shows that his doubts were in the past before his final decision.

After the storm passed, we saw the damage it had had on the neighbourhood.

Explanation: The storm caused damage before it ended. "Had had" indicates that the damage occurred during the storm before they observed it.

We had had that car for over a decade before we finally decided to sell it.

Explanation: The car was owned for many years before the decision to sell it. "Had had" shows that the ownership period was completed before the sale decision.

By the time the movie started, they had had enough time to buy snacks and find their seats.

Explanation: They had already used the time before the movie to buy snacks and sit down. "Had had" highlights that these actions were completed before the movie began.

Each example demonstrates how "had had" is used to show that one past action.

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Alternative verbs

Sometimes, sentences with "had had" can be rewritten with alternate verbs for clarity.

"She had owned that car for years before she sold it" instead of
"She had had that car for years before she sold it."

Here are some alternatives for the previous sentences.

Original	Alternative
By the time she found the error, she had had multiple opportunities to correct it.	By the time she found the error, she had **received** multiple opportunities to correct it.
After the guests left, we realised we had had enough food for everyone.	After the guests left, we realised we had **prepared** enough food for everyone.
They had had a long conversation before making the decision.	They had **engaged** in a long conversation before making the decision.
Before the new manager arrived, the team had had several meetings about the changes.	Before the new manager arrived, the team had **conducted** several meetings about the changes.
By the time I reached the station, the train had had a delay and still hadn't arrived.	By the time I reached the station, the train had **experienced** a delay and still hadn't arrived.
She had had a rough day at work before she came home and relaxed.	She had **endured** a rough day at work before she came home and relaxed.
He had had doubts about the plan, but he decided to go along with it anyway.	He had **harboured** doubts about the plan, but he decided to go along with it anyway.
After the storm passed, we saw the damage it had had on the neighbourhood.	After the storm passed, we saw the damage it had **caused** to the neighbourhood.
We had had that car for over a decade before we finally decided to sell it.	We had **owned** that car for over a decade before we finally decided to sell it.
By the time the movie started, they had had enough time to buy snacks and find their seats.	By the time the movie started, they had **taken** enough time to buy snacks and find their seats

- These alternatives demonstrate how "had had" can be replaced by other past perfect constructions to convey the same sequence of events.
- Choosing and using alternative main verb forms encourages more ambitious use of vocabulary.