

Tense and Aspect



Tense or Aspect: A quick-reference table

| Form | How it behaves |
|-------------|--|
| Indicative | Always by tense |
| Infinitive | Naturally by aspect (after e.g. βούλομαι) <i>but</i> In Indirect Statements/Commands, it behaves like what it replaces |
| Optative | Naturally by aspect (e.g. after ἵνα, in Indefinite Clauses/Conditions) <i>but</i> In Indirect Statements/Questions, it behaves like what it replaces |
| Subjunctive | Always by aspect |
| Imperative | Always by aspect |

It is clear from the above table that most verb forms in Greek, including nearly everything that you find in subordinate clauses, is more likely to behave by aspect than by tense.

NB The Imperfect and Future (where these exist) always operate by tense.

Practice Sentences

1. οἱ δ' Ἀθηναῖοι, ἵνα μὴ διασπασθῆσαν, ἐπηκολούθουν.

.....

2. οὕτω δ' ἐτάχθησαν, ἵνα μὴ διέκπλουν διδοῖεν.

.....

3. ὑπονοῶν ὅτι ἀποπορεύσοιτο καὶ ἀπάξει τὸν στρατὸν οἴκαδε, διέβη τῆς νυκτὸς.

.....

4. οἴμοι, τί δράσω; τίς σε βαστάσει φίλων;

.....

5. ἐπεὶ δὲ οἱ πολέμοι κατεῖχον, οὐδὲν ἔχοντες ὅ τι ποιήσαιεν, παρέδωσαν σφᾶς αὐτούς.

.....

6. πῶς οὖν ἂν μετριώτατα σκοποῖμεθα αὐτά;

.....

7. ἀεὶ πείθομαι τῷ λόγῳ ὃς ἂν μοι λογιζομένῳ βέλτιστος φαίνεται.

.....

8. οὐδὲ βουλευέσθαι ἔτι ὥρα, ἀλλὰ βεβουλευῆσθαι.

.....

Notes to Practice Sentences

1. And the Athenians, in order not to be separated from the others, followed closely behind.

Xenophon, *Hellenica* 4.2.18: διασπασθείσαν is aorist optative by aspect in a purpose clause. The Athenians are trying to avoid being separated from their allies on this one specific occasion. ἐπηκολούθουν is the imperfect of ἐπακολουθέω, and so could be translated as (e.g.) 'kept following closely behind'.

Vocabulary note: σπάω 'I tear' is the root of the σπαραγμός suffered memorably by King Pentheus at the climax of Euripides' *Bacchae*.

2. And they were arranged like this in order not to allow a sailing-through.

Xenophon, *Hellenica* 1.6.31: δίδωμι is present optative by aspect in a purpose clause. The generals are trying to prevent the enemy ships from smashing their way through not just once but repeatedly. Notice that δίδωμι + infinitive or abstract noun often means 'grant' or 'allow'.

3. Suspecting that he would march back and would lead his army back home, he crossed over during the night.

Xenophon, *Hellenica* 4.8.35: ἀποπορεύσοιτο and ἀπάξοι are both future optatives after ὅτι, replacing the future indicative of direct speech and operating purely by tense. Note that this is the *only* situation in Greek where the future optative is used.

4. Alas, what am I to do? Which of your friends will raise you up?

Sophocles, *Ajax* 920. Tecmessa laments over the body of Ajax. δράσω is aorist subjunctive, indicating that it is a deliberative question focussed on the current situation. Contrast βασιτάσει, which is a regular future tense (βαστάζω = lift up (e.g. for burial)).

5. And since the enemy were in control, having nothing that they could do, they gave themselves up.

Xenophon, *Hellenica* 1.3.21: How on earth did I get 'that they could do' out of ὅ τι ποιήσαιεν? ὅ τι (not ὅτι) is the traditional way of spelling the neuter of ὅστις, which is used as an *indirect* interrogative, i.e. forms of ὅστις can (but don't always) replace the corresponding form of τίς when a direct question is rewritten in indirect speech.

Because we're dealing with indirect speech, this optative must be working like whatever it is replacing, which must have been some kind of aorist. The aorist indicative wouldn't have made sense here ('having nothing which they did...'), so the optative must be replacing an original aorist subjunctive – which itself would have operated by aspect! In other words, we have another deliberative question: their original thoughts were τί ποιήσωμεν; 'What are we to do?'

6. How, then, might we examine these matters most reasonably?

Plato, *Crito* 46c: Potential optative, with ἄν. This operates always by aspect (fairly weakly in this sentence, but suggesting a general procedure for examination rather than one that only applies to this particular situation).

7. I always obey whatever reasoning seems to me on reflection to be the best.

Plato, *Crito* 46b: Socrates is here making a general statement (ἀεί) about his decision-making practices, and so the indefinite clause uses a present subjunctive.

8. Yet, no longer is it is the time to be deliberating, but to have deliberated.

Plato, *Crito* 46a: A nice example here of the contrast between present aspect and *perfective* aspect, which stresses that an action is complete and yet still in some way has an effect on the present. Crito is reminding Socrates that his time is running out: if he wants to escape prison and live, he must make the decision to do so now.

Note: Some of these sentences have been adapted very lightly from the source material so that they would fit on to one line. If you have the time, it will be worth looking up the source of each sentence so that you can see how it fits into its immediate context. Note also that, because they are taken from genuine Greek authors, they are very difficult to translate correctly first time and out of context: if you got each sentence more than 50% right, you did very well!