

DUTCH PAST TENSE

OVT and VTT at a glance

Dutch commonly uses the OVT (ik werkte) and the VTT (ik heb gewerkt) for past events. Both can translate as the English simple past. The choice depends on how the speaker presents the event, not on one fixed English rule.

1. OVT: THE ONE-WORD PAST

WEAK / REGULAR VERBS

singular: stem + -te / -de
plural: stem + -ten / -den

werken -> werkte / werkten
worked

wandelen -> wandelde / wandelden
walked

Ik werkte gisteren thuis.
I worked at home yesterday.

COMMON USES

stories and sequences; background and past states; repeated habits in a past period

2. 'T KOFSCHIP

Use -te/-ten after the final underlying sound t, k, f, s, ch, p. Otherwise use -de/-den. The same choice gives -t or -d in a regular participle.

werken -> werkte -> gewerkt
worked

wonen -> woonde -> gewoond
lived

reizen -> reisde -> gereisd
travelled

leven -> leefde -> geleefd
lived

Important: for verbs in -ven and -zen, check the v or z in the infinitive, not only the final f/s of the written stem.

3. STRONG & IRREGULAR VERBS

Strong verbs change their stem vowel and usually have a participle ending in -en. Other verbs are irregular in different ways. Learn the three main forms together.

infinitive	OVT	participle	English
lezen	las/lazen	gelezen	read
schrijven	schreef/-ven	geschreven	wrote
drinken	dronk/-en	gedronken	drank
gaan	ging/-en	gegaan	went
brengen	bracht/-en	gebracht	brought

4. VTT: HAVE / BE + PARTICIPLE

hebben or zijn + past participle
Ik heb gewerkt. - I worked / have worked.
Hij is gekomen. - He came / has come.

REGULAR PARTICIPLE

ge- + stem + -d/-t: gewerkt, gewandeld, gereisd

NO EXTRA GE-

after inseparable prefixes: betaald, verteld, ontdekt, herhaald

SEPARABLE VERBS

opbellen -> opgebeld
called

5. HEBBEN OR ZIJN?

MOST VERBS: HEBBEN

Ik heb gegeten. - I ate.
We hebben de film gezien. - We saw the film.

COMMON ZIJN VERBS

gaan, komen, vertrekken, aankomen, vallen, sterven, worden, blijven, gebeuren

Movement can change auxiliary:

Ik heb drie uur gefietst.
I cycled for three hours.
Ik ben naar huis gefietst.
I cycled home.

6. OVT OR VTT?

VTT - a completed fact or single event in the current conversation

Gisteren heb ik thuis gewerkt.
I worked at home yesterday.

OVT - a story, sequence, background, state or repeated past habit

Toen ik student was, werkte ik vaak thuis.
When I was a student, I often worked at home.

Frequent OVT forms in speech: was, had, kon, moest, wilde, wist.

Context matters: both tenses can be correct, but they present the past differently.

QUICK DECISION

One completed fact? VTT is often natural.
Telling a story or describing a past situation? OVT is often natural.
Do not translate English tense mechanically.

WORD ORDER

VTT main clause:
Ik heb gisteren thuis gewerkt.
I worked at home yesterday.
Subordinate: ... omdat ik thuis heb gewerkt.

COMMON TRAPS

Not every irregular verb is strong.
Movement does not always mean zijn.
Do not add ge- to betaald / verteld.
Past before past: had gewerkt (VTT).