

Grappling Grammar: used to

In this week's blog post, we will be going over how to talk or write about past actions and abilities in English, in other words, things that we did or could do in the past but don't do or are no longer to do. For this we need to use a form of the past that involves the expression "used to".

While the present simple is used to talk about our current routines and habits, "used to" can be used to express things we did regularly in the past such as past hobbies or habits. When building a sentence with this expression it is structured like this:

Subject + used to + verb (in infinitive)

Here are some examples:

- I used to play football every weekend. (I played football every weekend in the past, but I don't anymore.)
- She used to live in New York. (She lived in New York in the past, but she doesn't now.)
- They used to be best friends. (They were best friends in the past, but they aren't now.)

When talking in the present, we normally use expressions like "usually" and "tend to" and other frequency adverbs to talk about our current habits:

- He usually plays football every weekend.
- We normally go to the beach in the Summer.
- James tends to go shopping on Thursdays.

When using the negative of "used to", the structure changes:

Subject + didn't (did not) + use to + verb (in infinitive)

Here, we add "didn't" to make the structure negative and remove the "d" from "used" as "didn't" is already in the past. Here are some examples:

- I didn't use to like spinach. (I didn't like spinach in the past, but I do now.)
- They didn't use to go shopping on Thursdays. (They didn't go shopping on Thursday, but they do now.)

When forming questions with “used to” the structure also changes like this:

Did + subject + use + to + verb (in infinitive)

Again, in the question form we remove the “d” from “used” because “Did” is already in the past form. Here are some examples:

- Did you use to play a musical instrument?
- Did you use to like carrots?
- Did you use to listen to rock music?

By understanding these structures, you can effectively use "used to" to talk about past habits or states, and simple present or other constructions to talk about current habits.

Now let's test your knowledge with some activities:

Exercise 1: Affirmative Form

Complete the sentences using "used to" and the verb in parentheses.

1. When I was a child, I _____ (play) outside all day.
2. She _____ (work) at a bank before she became a teacher.
3. They _____ (go) to the beach every summer.
4. We _____ (eat) dinner together as a family every night.
5. He _____ (ride) his bike to school.

Exercise 2: Negative Form

Rewrite the sentences in the negative form using "didn't use to" or "used not to."

1. I _____ like broccoli.
2. She used to travel a lot for work.
3. She _____ travel a lot for work.
4. They used to own a pet dog.
5. They _____ own a pet dog.
6. We used to live in the city.
7. We _____ live in the city.
8. He used to play the piano.
9. He _____ play the piano.

Exercise 3: Interrogative Form

Rewrite the sentences as questions using "Did ... use to?"

1. You used to play basketball.

_____ you _____ play basketball?

2. She used to read a lot of books.

_____ she _____ read a lot of books?

3. They used to visit their grandparents every weekend.

_____ they _____ visit their grandparents every weekend?

4. He used to cook dinner every night.

_____ he _____ cook dinner every night?

5. We used to go hiking in the mountains.

_____ we _____ go hiking in the mountains?

Exercise 4: Mixed Practice

Complete the sentences using the correct form of "used to" (affirmative, negative, or interrogative).

1. _____ (you/play) chess when you were younger?
2. She _____ (not/like) spicy food, but now she loves it.
3. My grandparents _____ (tell) us stories about their childhood.
4. We _____ (not/have) a television when I was growing up.
5. _____ (they/live) in the countryside before moving to the city?

Answer key:

Exercise 1: Affirmative Form

1. When I was a child, I used to play outside all day.
2. She used to work at a bank before she became a teacher.
3. They used to go to the beach every summer.
4. We used to eat dinner together as a family every night.
5. He used to ride his bike to school.

Exercise 2: Negative Form

1. I didn't use to like broccoli.
2. She didn't use to travel a lot for work.
3. They didn't use to own a pet dog.
4. We didn't use to live in the city.
5. He didn't use to play the piano.

Exercise 3: Interrogative Form

1. Did you use to play basketball?
2. Did she use to read a lot of books?
3. Did they use to visit their grandparents every weekend?
4. Did he use to cook dinner every night?
5. Did we use to go hiking in the mountains?

Exercise 4: Mixed Practice

1. Did you use to play chess when you were younger?
2. She didn't use to like spicy food, but now she loves it.
3. My grandparents used to tell us stories about their childhood.
4. We didn't use to have a television when I was growing up.
5. Did they use to live in the countryside before moving to the city?