



ENGLISH GRAMMAR MADE CLEAR

Used to, Be Used to & Get Used to

Three structures that look almost the same but mean very different things: past habits, what feels normal, and adapting to something new.

I **used to** smoke

I'm **used to** working late

I'm **getting used to** it

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“Sound as capable in English as you are in your own language.”

Melissa B. Duarte · Business English for international professionals · duartebusinessenglish.com

What's the difference?

Used to, **be used to** and **get used to** look almost identical, but they have different meanings and different grammar. The key question: is it a **past habit** that has finished, or is it about something **being normal** (or **becoming normal**) for you?

PAST HABITS

used to + verb

Things that were true or happened regularly in the past, but not now.

I used to work in a bank.
(*I don't now.*)

NORMAL FOR ME

be used to + -ing

Something is familiar and normal for you, not strange or difficult.

I'm used to working long hours.
(*It's no problem.*)

BECOMING NORMAL

get used to + -ing

The process of adapting: something is becoming normal for you.

I'm getting used to the new system.
(*It's getting easier.*)

Three classic mistakes

- | | |
|---|--|
| ✗ I ~~use to~~ play tennis as a child. | ✓ I used to play tennis as a child. |
| ✗ I'm used to ~~work~~ late. | ✓ I'm used to working late. |
| ✗ Did you ~~used to~~ live here? | ✓ Did you use to live here? |

Why is it so tricky to master?

- 1 They look the same but mean different things.** One word (*be* or *get*) completely changes the meaning.
- 2 The to is different.** In *used to* + verb, *to* is part of the infinitive. In *be / get used to*, *to* is a preposition, so it's followed by **-ing** or a noun.
- 3 Used to is only for the past.** For present habits, use *usually* + present simple: I **usually** get up at 7, not I ~~use to~~ get up at 7.
- 4 Questions and negatives lose the -d.** Did you **use** to...? I didn't **use** to...
- 5 Be used to and get used to work in every tense:** You'll get used to it. I've got used to it. I wasn't used to it.

The rules side by side

used to + verb

past habits & states

- 1 **Past habits: repeated actions**
I used to cycle to work every day.
- 2 **Past states**
with *be, have, live, know, like*
We used to have an office in Lyon.
- 3 **Contrasting the past and the present**
She used to be shy, but now she's very confident.
- 4 **Negative: didn't use to / never used to**
I didn't use to like coffee.
- 5 **Questions: Did ... use to?**
Did you use to work in sales?
- 6 **would for past habits (not states)**
Every summer we would go to the beach.
- 7 **No present form**
For present habits, use *usually*.
I usually walk to work.

be / get used to + -ing

familiar & adapting

- 1 **be used to = it's normal for me**
I'm used to the noise now.
- 2 **+ -ing, a noun or a pronoun**
She's used to presenting to big groups. I'm used to it.
- 3 **get used to = the process of adapting**
It took me months to get used to driving on the left.
- 4 **Any tense**
You'll get used to it. I've got used to the cold.
- 5 **Negative: not used to**
I'm not used to working at weekends.
- 6 **Questions**
Are you used to the new hours?
- 7 **Never + base verb**
I'm ~~used to work~~ → I'm used to working.

Quick check which one do I need?

A past habit that's finished?

→ used to + verb

I used to live in Rome.

Normal and familiar now?

→ be used to + -ing

I'm used to living abroad.

Becoming normal?

→ get used to + -ing

I'm getting used to living abroad.

Compare them

Look how the meaning changes when the situation is the same.

Same situation, three meanings

Working at night

used to A FINISHED HABIT

I used to work at night. (*I don't now.*)

be used to IT'S NORMAL

I'm used to working at night. (*No problem.*)

get used to ADAPTING

I'm getting used to working at night. (*It's new.*)

Driving on the left

used to A FINISHED HABIT

I used to drive on the left when I lived in the UK.

be used to IT'S NORMAL

I'm British, so I'm used to driving on the left.

get used to ADAPTING

It took me a month to get used to driving on the left.

used to vs would

& other tips

1 would: repeated past actions only

When I was a child, my dad would take me fishing.

2 used to: actions *and* states

I used to have long hair. (~~I would have~~)

3 would needs a clear past context

Start with *used to*, then continue with *would*.

We used to work late. We'd order pizza and...

Pronunciation

used to sounds like /'ju:stə/ ("yoos-tə"). The *d* is silent and the *s* is an /s/, not a /z/.

Present habits

~~I use to go to the gym.~~ → I **usually** go to the gym. / I **normally** go to the gym.

Exercises

1**Choose the correct option**

Circle the correct option.

1. I live in Paris, but now I live in Madrid.
2. She's working under pressure.
3. It took me a long time to used to the new software.
4. Did you play any sports at school?
5. I'm not used to up so early.
6. We have a canteen, but now we do.
7. Don't worry, you'll soon used to it.
8. He takes the train to work.

2**Complete the sentences**Use the correct form of **used to**, **be used to** or **get used to** + the verb in brackets.

1. When I was a student, I _____ (*work*) in a café at weekends.
2. I've lived in London for ten years, so I _____ (*drive*) on the left.
3. Our new office is huge. It'll take a while to _____ (*find*) my way around.
4. _____ (*you / live*) in the city center before you moved here?
5. I _____ (*not / speak*) English at work, so meetings are still hard for me.
6. She _____ (*not / like*) coffee, but now she drinks four cups a day!
7. After six months, he finally _____ (*work*) night shifts.

Exercises

3

Say it another way

Rewrite each sentence so it means the same. Use the word in capitals.

1. I don't smoke now, but I smoked in the past.

USED

I

2. Working at weekends is normal for me.

USED

I

3. Living abroad is becoming easier for me.

GETTING

I

4. Speaking in public isn't normal for me.

NOT

I

5. Was there a factory here in the past?

USE

Did

4

Find the mistake

Some sentences are correct. Tick (✓) the correct ones and rewrite the others correctly.

1. I use to go running every morning.

☐

2. I'm used to get up early.

☐

3. Did you used to have long hair?

☐

4. It's hard, but I'm getting used to it.

☐

5. When I was young, I would have a dog.

☐

6. She isn't used to working in an open-plan office.

☐

Exercises

5

Life in Tokyo

Complete the email with the correct form of the words in brackets.

Hi Sara,

I've been in Tokyo for three months now! At first it was hard. I ¹ _____ (*not / be used to*) the crowds, and I ² _____ (*not / be used to / eat*) with chopsticks. In London I ³

_____ (*used to / cycle*) to work, but here I take the train. I'm slowly ⁴

_____ (*get used to / speak*) Japanese at work, and my colleagues are very patient.

I'm sure I ⁵ _____ (*get used to*) everything soon!

Love, Kate

6

What does it mean?

Match each sentence (1-5) with its meaning (a-e).

1. I used to live in Spain.

☐

2. I'm used to living in Spain.

☐

3. I'm getting used to living in Spain.

☐

4. I didn't use to live in Spain.

☐

5. I'll never get used to living in Spain.

☐

a Living in Spain is new, but it's getting easier.

b I lived in Spain in the past, but I don't now.

c Living in Spain feels completely normal for me.

d I think living in Spain will always feel strange.

e I live in Spain now, but I didn't before.

7

Your turn

Complete the sentences about yourself.

1. When I was a child, I used to ...

2. At work, I'm used to ...

3. Something I'm still getting used to is ...

Answer key

1 Choose the correct option

- | | |
|------------|------------------|
| 1. used to | 2. used to |
| 3. get | 4. use to |
| 5. getting | 6. didn't use to |
| 7. get | 8. usually |

2 Complete the sentences

- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. used to work | 2. 'm used to driving |
| 3. get used to finding | 4. Did you use to live |
| 5. 'm not used to speaking | 6. didn't use to like |
| 7. got used to working | |

3 Say it another way

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. I used to smoke . | 2. I'm used to working at weekends. |
| 3. I'm getting used to living abroad. | 4. I'm not used to speaking in public. |
| 5. Did there use to be a factory here? | |

4 Find the mistake

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. I usually go running every morning. / I used to go... (past) | 2. I'm used to getting up early. |
| 3. Did you use to have long hair? | 4. ✓ Correct |
| 5. When I was young, I used to have a dog. | 6. ✓ Correct |

5 Life in Tokyo

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. wasn't used to | 2. wasn't used to eating |
| 3. used to cycle | 4. getting used to speaking |
| 5. 'll get used to | |

6 What does it mean?

- | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|
| 1. b | 2. c | 3. a | 4. e |
| 5. d | | | |

7 Your turn

- When I was a child, I used to **spend** summers at my grandparents'.
- At work, I'm used to **dealing** with difficult clients.
- Something I'm still getting used to is **working** from home.

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