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HUNGARIAN LESSON

Hungarian Grammar 3 · Chapter 4 · Irregular Pasts

🔀 Stems That Change — A szabálytalan igék

Chapters 2 and 3 gave you the regular past. Some of the most frequent verbs do not follow it, because their stem changes before the past marker: megy becomes ment-, tesz becomes tett-, jön becomes jött-. They are only a few dozen verbs, but you will use them every day. This chapter sorts them into groups so that each group is one pattern to learn, not a list of surprises.

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

The irregular verbs still take the same past endings as the regular ones (*-m, -l, nothing, -nk, -tok, -k* after the marker), in both conjugations. What changes is the **stem plus marker**: *megy → ment-, tesz → tett-, vesz → vett-, visz → vitt-, jön → jött-, lesz → lett-*. Learn the 1st-person and 3rd-person singular together; the other persons follow.

1. The sz-verbs: tesz, vesz, visz, hisz, lesz

Seven common verbs have an unstable root with *sz* in the present. Five of them turn the *sz* into *tt* in the past: *tesz* (put), *vesz* (take, buy), *visz* (carry), *hisz* (believe) and *lesz* (become, will be). The other two, *eszik* and *iszik*, you met in Chapter 2.

PERSON	TESZ (PUT)	VESZ (TAKE, BUY)	VISZ (CARRY)	LESZ (BECOME)
I	**tettem**	**vettem**	**vittem**	**lettem**
you (sg)	**tettél**	**vettél**	**vittél**	**lettél**
he, she	**tett**	**vett**	**vitt**	**lett**
we	**tettünk**	**vettünk**	**vittünk**	**lettünk**
you (pl)	**tettetek**	**vettetek**	**vittetek**	**lettetek**
they	**tettek**	**vettek**	**vittek**	**lettek**

The definite past of the first three is the usual set, built on the same stem: **tettem, tetted, tette, tettük, tettétek, tették**; **vettem, vetted, vette, vettük, vettétek, vették**; **vittem, vitted, vitte, vittük, vittétek, vitték**. *Lesz* and *hisz* take a dative or a noun, not a direct object, so they use the indefinite set.

HUNGARIAN	ENGLISH	CONJUGATION
Vettem egy telefont.	I bought a phone.	indefinite object
Vettem a telefont.	I bought the phone.	definite object (same form in the 1st person)
A telefont az asztalra tettem.	I put the phone on the table.	definite
A kulcsot a táskába tetted?	Did you put the key in the bag?	definite, 2nd person: *tetted*
Vittem egy könyvet.	I took (carried) a book.	indefinite object
Nem hittem neki.	I didn't believe him/her.	dative, so indefinite
Orvos lett.	He/she became a doctor.	no object

> **Watch out: vett and vitt, tett and hitt**
>
> **vett** (bought, took) and **vitt** (carried) differ by one vowel, and so do **lett** (became) and **tett** (put). Learn them with a verb you remember: *vesz* → *vett* (e), *visz* → *vitt* (i). The infinitives show the vowels too: **venni** (to take, buy), **vinni** (to carry), **tenni** (to put), **lenni** (to be, to become).

> **lenni is the infinitive of both van and lesz**
>
> *van* (is) and *lesz* (will be, becomes) share the infinitive *lenni*, but their pasts differ: **volt** for "was" and **lett** for "became". Compare **Hideg volt** (It was cold) with **Hideg lett** (It got cold) and **Mi lett belőle?** (What became of it?).

2. megy and jön

Two basic verbs of motion change their stems completely. *Megy* uses *ment-* in the past and *jön* uses *jött-*, and neither takes an object, so only the indefinite set exists.

PERSON	MEGY (GO)	JÖN (COME)
I	**mentem**	**jöttem**
you (sg)	**mentél**	**jöttél**
he, she	**ment**	**jött**
we	**mentünk**	**jöttünk**
you (pl)	**mentetek**	**jöttetek**
they	**mentek**	**jöttek**

HUNGARIAN	ENGLISH
Tegnap moziba mentem.	I went to the cinema yesterday.
Honnan jöttél?	Where did you come from?
Jött egy levél.	A letter came.
Busszal mentek.	They went by bus.

> **Watch out: mentek means two things**
>
> **mentek** is both the 3rd person plural past ("they went") and the 2nd person plural present ("you (pl) go"). The context and any time word tell you which: **Tegnap mentek** (they went yesterday) against **Ti hova mentek?** (Where are you going?).

3. fekszik, alszik and esik

Three *-ik* verbs with *sz* in the present change it in the past. *Alszik* (sleep) becomes *aludt-* (Chapter 2); *fekszik* (lie) becomes *feküdt-*; *esik* (fall, rain) takes *est-* before the endings and *esett* in the 3rd person singular.

PERSON	FEKSZIK (LIE)	ESIK (FALL; RAIN)
I	**feküdtem**	**estem**
you (sg)	**feküdtél**	**estél**
he, she, it	**feküdt**	**esett**
we	**feküdtünk**	**estünk**
you (pl)	**feküdtetek**	**estetek**
they	**feküdtek**	**estek**

The 3rd person of *esik* is the one you hear most: **Tegnap esett az eső** (It rained yesterday). Another common *-ik* verb, **tetszik** (be pleasing), is regular in the past: **A film tetszett nekem** (I liked the film).

4. Vowel stems

A few short verbs end in a long vowel and double the marker: **lő** (shoot), **nő** (grow), **fő** (boil). They behave as in Chapter 2.

PERSON	LŐ	NŐ
I	**lőttem**	**nőttem**
he, she	**lőtt**	**nőtt**
they	**lőttek**	**nőttek**

5. Verbs with -ott- or -ett- in every person

Some regular-looking verbs insert *-ott- / -ett- / -ött-* in the whole paradigm, not only in the 3rd person. Chapter 3 introduced *hall* and the *-ít* verbs. The group also includes several short verbs.

VERB	I	HE, SHE	ENGLISH
hall	hallottam	hallott	hear
fut	futottam	futott	run
süt	sütöttem	sütött	bake; shine
nyit	nyitottam	nyitott	open
tanít	tanítottam	tanított	teach
segít	segítettem	segített	help

6. Modal verbs in the past

The verbs of wanting, being able and having to are among the most frequent in the past. *Akar* and *tud* follow the regular pattern; *kell* and *lehet* exist only in the 3rd person and take *-ett*, and *szabad* forms its past with *volt*. Chapter 5 returns to these with the infinitive.

PRESENT	PAST	EXAMPLE
akar	akartam · akart	**Nem akartam menni.** · I didn't want to go.
tud	tudtam · tudott	**Nem tudtam jönni.** · I couldn't come.
kell	kellett	**Dolgozni kellett.** · I/we/he had to work.
lehet	lehetett	**Lehetett parkolni?** · Was it possible to park?
szabad	szabad volt	**Szabad volt bemenni.** · We were allowed to go in.

7. The most-used irregular verbs at a glance

Use this table as a reference: each row gives the dictionary entry, the infinitive, the 1st and 3rd person singular indefinite past, and the 3rd person singular definite past where the verb can take an object.

VERB	INFINITIVE	I	HE, SHE	HE, SHE (DEFINITE)	ENGLISH
van	lenni	voltam	volt	—	be
lesz	lenni	lettem	lett	—	become
megy	menni	mentem	ment	—	go
jön	jönni	jöttem	jött	—	come
tesz	tenni	tettem	tett	tette	put
vesz	venni	vettem	vett	vette	take, buy
visz	vinni	vittem	vitt	vitte	carry
hisz	hinni	hittem	hitt	—	believe
eszik	enni	ettem	evett	ette	eat
iszik	inni	ittam	ivott	itta	drink
alszik	aludni	aludtam	aludt	—	sleep
fekszik	feküdni	feküdtem	feküdt	—	lie
esik	esni	estem	esett	—	fall; rain
lát	látni	láttam	látott	látta	see
mond	mondani	mondtam	mondott	mondta	say
ad	adni	adtam	adott	adta	give
tud	tudni	tudtam	tudott	tudta	know; can
hall	hallani	hallottam	hallott	hallotta	hear
fut	futni	futottam	futott	—	run
áll	állni	álltam	állt	—	stand
lő	lőni	lőttem	lőtt	lőtte	shoot

VERB	INFINITIVE	I	HE, SHE	HE, SHE (DEFINITE)	ENGLISH
nő	nőni	nőttem	nőtt	—	grow

🗣️ In Use — Használatban

The irregular pasts in short exchanges.

① Shopping

A:

Hova mentél tegnap?

Where did you go yesterday?

B:

A boltba mentem, és vettem egy telefont.

I went to the shop and bought a phone.

A:

Mit vettél még?

What else did you buy?

B:

Vettem kenyeret is, és hoztam kávét.

I bought bread too, and I brought coffee.

② Where did you put it?

A:

Hová tetted a kulcsot?

Where did you put the key?

B:

A táskámba tettem.

I put it in my bag.

③ What became of him?

A:

Mi lett belőle?

What became of him?

B:

Orvos lett.

He became a doctor.

A:

Én nem hittem, hogy sikerül neki.

I didn't believe he'd manage it.

B:

Én hittem benne.

I believed in him.

📋 Quick Reference — Gyorstábla

GROUP	PATTERN	EXAMPLES
sz-verbs	sz → tt	**tesz → tett-** · **vesz → vett-** · **visz → vitt-** · **hisz → hitt-** · **lesz → lett-**
eszik, iszik	et- / it- and ev- / iv- in the 3rd sg	**ettem, evett** · **ittam, ivott**
Motion	new stem	**megy → ment-** · **jön → jött-**
-szik / -ik verbs	sz → d, or est-	**alszik → aludt-** · **fekszik → feküdt-** · **esik → est-, esett**
Vowel stems	marker doubles	**lő → lőtt-** · **nő → nőtt-**
-ott- throughout	learn with the verb	**hallottam** · **futottam** · **tanítottam**
Modals	kell, lehet only 3rd person	**kellett** · **lehetett** · **szabad volt**

🖍️ Try It Yourself — Gyakorlás

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. "I went": *megy*, past.

▼ Show answer

mentem.

2. "He came": *jön*, past.

▼ Show answer

jött.

3. "You (sg) put": *tesz*, past.

▼ Show answer

tettél.

4. "We bought": *vesz*, past.

▼ Show answer

vettünk.

5. "They carried": *visz*, past.

▼ Show answer

vittek.

6. "I became": *lesz*, past.

▼ Show answer

lettem.

7. "I lay down": *fekszik*, past.

▼ Show answer

feküdtem.

8. Translate: "I put the phone on the table."

▼ Show answer

A telefont az asztalra tettem.

9. Translate: "She became a doctor."

▼ Show answer

Orvos lett.

10. Fix the sentence: *Tegnap jöttam* (I came yesterday).

▼ Show answer

Tegnap jöttem. The stem *jött-* is front, so the ending is *-em*.

Coming up in Chapter 5: The Future and Helper Verbs. *fog* + the infinitive, the present with a time word, the helper verbs *akar, tud, szeretne, kell, lehet, szabad*, and the personal infinitive (*mennem kell*).