

B1 TEENS

Urban Legends Around the World

Storytelling, narrative tenses and using past perfect to sequence events

B1 Intermediate | Reading | Grammar | 40 min

★ Lesson Objectives

- ✓ Read urban legends from different countries and cultures
- ✓ Learn vocabulary for storytelling, fear and the supernatural
- ✓ Use past perfect (had + past participle) to sequence events
- ✓ Combine past simple and past perfect in narratives
- ✓ Retell and discuss urban legends
- ✓ Write your own urban legend using narrative tenses

1 Before You Read

- ▶ Do you know any scary stories from your country?
- ▶ Have you ever heard a story someone swore was true -- but you weren't sure?
- ▶ Why do people enjoy telling and listening to scary stories?

2 Reading: Stories That Never Die

Words in this colour are key vocabulary -- definitions are in Section 3.

Stories That Never Die

Every culture has its own collection of **urban legends** -- strange, creepy stories that people tell as if they were true. They are passed from person to person, from generation to generation, and they change slightly each time someone **retells** them. Nobody knows who **originally** invented them, and nobody can prove whether they really happened. But that's exactly what makes them so powerful -- the idea that they might be true.

The Vanishing Hitchhiker -- USA / Europe

This is one of the most **widespread** urban legends in the world. A driver is travelling alone on a dark road late at night. They see a young woman standing by the side of the

road. She looks pale and **frightened**, so the driver stops and offers her a **lift**. The woman gets in the back seat and gives an address. When the driver arrives, they turn around -- but the back seat is empty. The woman has **vanished**. Confused and **disturbed**, the driver knocks on the door. An old woman answers. She explains that the young woman was her daughter -- and that she had died in a car accident on that very road, twenty years earlier. The driver realised that he had given a lift to a **ghost**.

Kuchisake-onna -- Japan

In Japan, one of the most famous **legends** is the story of Kuchisake-onna, the "Slit-Mouthed Woman." According to the story, a beautiful woman had been **murdered** by her jealous husband centuries ago. Now her **spirit** wanders the streets at night, wearing a surgical mask. She approaches people and asks: "Am I beautiful?" If you say yes, she removes her mask and reveals her **horrifying** face. The legend became so popular in the 1970s that some schools had sent children home early because parents had become genuinely **frightened**. Even today, many Japanese children feel **uneasy** when they see someone in a mask at night.

La Llorona -- Mexico / Latin America

La Llorona, "The Weeping Woman," is one of the oldest and most **haunting** legends in Latin America. A woman named Maria had fallen deeply in love with a rich man. They had two children, but the man left her. Driven mad by **grief** and **jealousy**, Maria had drowned her own children in a river. When she realised what she had done, she **collapsed** and died. Her spirit now wanders along rivers, crying and searching for her children. Parents have told this story for hundreds of years to **warn** children not to go near water after dark. Many people **claim** to have heard her **weeping** on quiet nights.

Why Do Urban Legends Survive?

Folklorist Dr. Yuki Tanaka says these stories survive because they serve a purpose. "Every urban legend has a **moral** or a warning hidden inside it. The Vanishing Hitchhiker warns us to be careful on the road. Kuchisake-onna teaches children to be cautious around **strangers**. La Llorona warns children to stay away from dangerous water. These stories pass down **wisdom** from one generation to the next."

Dr. Tanaka also points out that urban legends reveal what a culture is afraid of. "In countries where driving is common, legends involve cars and roads. In coastal areas, legends involve the sea. The stories change, but the fears stay the same -- darkness, strangers, death, and the unknown. The reason these stories never die is simple: once you've heard one, you can never forget it."

3 Vocabulary

Word	Definition	Example
urban legend	widely told scary story, believed true but unproven	"The Vanishing Hitchhiker is famous."
retell	tell a story again, with small changes	"Each person retells it differently."

Word	Definition	Example
originally	at the beginning; at first	"Nobody knows who originally invented it."
widespread	found in many places	"One of the most widespread legends."
vanish	disappear suddenly and completely	"The woman had vanished."
disturbed	feeling worried or unsettled	"The driver felt deeply disturbed."
ghost / spirit	soul of a dead person	"He had given a lift to a ghost."
horrifying	extremely shocking and frightening	"She reveals her horrifying face."
haunting	staying in your mind; unforgettable	"La Llorona is a haunting story."
grief	deep sadness after loss	"Driven mad by grief."
collapse	fall down suddenly	"She collapsed and died."
weeping	crying quietly and sadly	"People heard her weeping."
folklorist	person who studies traditional stories	"Folklorist Dr. Tanaka."
moral	lesson about right and wrong	"Every legend has a moral."
wisdom	knowledge from experience	"Passing down wisdom."
stranger	person you don't know	"Be cautious around strangers."

Collocations: urban legend • pass down a story • send shivers down your spine • the story goes that • according to legend • swear it's true • driven mad by • from generation to generation

4 Grammar: Past Perfect (had + past participle)

Past perfect = EARLIER event: "She explained that her daughter had died twenty years earlier."

Past perfect + past simple: "The driver realised (2nd) that he had given a lift to a ghost (1st)."

Background: "Maria had fallen deeply in love before the tragedy happened."

Tense	Form	Use	Example
Past Simple	verb-ed / irregular	Main event	She screamed.
Past Perfect	had + past participle	Earlier event	She had seen a ghost.

Sequencing: "When the driver arrived, the woman had vanished." (vanishing first)

"By the time the police arrived, the ghost had disappeared."

Not needed when chronological: "She got in, gave the address and sat quietly."
(all past simple)

⚠ Common Mistakes

~~When I arrived, she already left.~~ → she had already left.

~~I had went to the shop yesterday.~~ → I went to the shop yesterday. (specific time = past simple)

~~She had been scared because she saw a ghost.~~ → She was scared because she had seen a ghost.

5 Match the Halves

#	Main Event (Past Simple)	Earlier Event (Past Perfect)
1	She screamed	because she had seen a ghost.
2	The driver turned around	but the woman had vanished.
3	By the time police arrived,	the house had burned down.
4	He felt sick	because he had eaten something strange.
5	She didn't recognise the place	because it had changed completely.
6	When they opened the door,	someone had already been inside.
7	I couldn't find my phone	because I had left it on the bus.
8	They were hungry	because they hadn't eaten all day.
9	The teacher was angry	because nobody had done the homework.
10	She passed the exam	because she had studied every night.

6 Comprehension Quiz

1. What happens to the hitchhiker?

Answer: She vanishes from the back seat

2. What happened to Kuchisake-onna?

Answer: She was murdered by her jealous husband

3. Why did Maria drown her children?

Answer: Driven mad by grief and jealousy

4. Why do urban legends survive (Dr. Tanaka)?

Answer: They contain morals and warnings

5. 'She had died twenty years earlier.' Why past perfect?

Answer: It happened BEFORE the driver's visit

6. 'By the time police arrived, the ghost had disappeared.' First?

Answer: The ghost disappeared

7. When DON'T you need past perfect?

Answer: When events are in chronological order

8. Which is WRONG?

Answer: When I arrived, she already left.

7 Fill in the Blanks

Word Bank: had vanished • had died • had never seen • had already left • had eaten • had fallen • had told • had heard

1. When the driver turned around, the woman _____.

2. The old woman said her daughter _____ twenty years ago.

3. He was terrified because he _____ a ghost before.

4. By the time I got to the party, everyone _____.

5. She felt sick because she _____ something strange.

6. Maria _____ in love before the tragedy happened.

7. The children were scared because someone _____ them the legend.

8. She recognised the story because she _____ it from her grandmother.

Answers: 1. had vanished • 2. had died • 3. had never seen • 4. had already left • 5. had eaten • 6. had fallen • 7. had told • 8. had heard

8 Speaking & Writing

◆ Discussion Questions

Which legend was the most frightening? Why?

Do you know any urban legends from your own country?

Why are scary stories so popular with teenagers?

Do urban legends serve a useful purpose?

Has anyone told you a story you believed at first but was made up?

◆ **Example Dialogue**

A: Have you heard of La Llorona?

B: No, what is it?

A: A woman had fallen in love with a rich man, but he left her. She drowned her own children.

B: That's horrifying! What happened to her?

A: She died of grief. Her spirit still wanders by rivers, weeping.

B: Had you heard of it before this lesson? My grandmother had told me a similar story.

✍ **Writing Task**

Write 100-150 words. Use at least 4 past perfect sentences:

Option A: Write your own urban legend. Set the scene, build tension, end with a twist.

Option B: Retell a scary story from your country. What is the moral?

9 Legend or Lie? — The Game

Interactive game available online. Choose the correct past perfect form in 10 legend sentences!

#	Sentence	Answer
1	She screamed because she ___ a ghost. (see)	had seen
2	When they arrived, the house ___ down. (burn)	had burned
3	He was tired because he ___ all night. (not sleep)	hadn't slept
4	By the time I got home, everyone ___. (leave)	had left
5	She didn't eat because she ___ a big lunch. (have)	had had
6	The road was wet because it ___. (rain)	had rained
7	I recognised her because I ___ her before. (meet)	had met
8	The children were scared -- they ___ the story. (hear)	had heard
9	Someone ___ a note inside the box. (already put)	had already put

#	Sentence	Answer
10	She ___ the building before the earthquake. (leave)	had left

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Review Checklist

- ✓ I can understand urban legends from different cultures
- ✓ I can use vocabulary for storytelling, fear and the supernatural
- ✓ I can form past perfect (had + past participle) correctly
- ✓ I can use past perfect to show which event happened first
- ✓ I can retell scary stories and discuss their meaning
- ✓ I can write a story using past simple and past perfect together

Congratulations!

You have completed this lesson: Urban Legends Around the World