

Grammar: didn't need to / needn't have

First of all, the two structures are *didn't need to* and *need not have*. *Need not have* is not followed by *to + infinitive*, it is followed by a past participle. *Need not have* is often contracted to *needn't have*.

The difference is that when you say *needn't have*, the action described did happen, and was unnecessary. When you say *didn't need to*, the action described may or may not have happened, and was unnecessary. The surrounding context should show whether it happened or not.

You needn't have cooked me dinner. I ate at work. (the dinner was cooked, and unnecessary)

You didn't need to cook me dinner. I ate at work. (the dinner was cooked, and unnecessary)

Both these forms are used to talk about past events, but there is sometimes a difference in use. When we say that someone **needn't have** done something, it means that they did it, but it was not necessary. **Didn't need to** is also sometimes used in this way:

You needn't have washed the dishes. I would've put them in the dishwasher.
You didn't need to wash the dishes. I would've put them in the dishwasher.
I didn't need to prepare all that food. They phoned to say they wouldn't be coming.

I needn't have prepared all that food. They phoned to say they wouldn't be coming.

But we also use **didn't need to** to say that something was not necessary under circumstances where it was not done:

*The sun came out so we **didn't need to** take any rainwear on the trip.*
*We had plenty of petrol in the tank so I **didn't need to** fill up.*
*We **didn't need to** wait for long for them. They arrived just after us.*