Activity Sheet 21: Verb Tense - Understanding the Perfect Tenses

I owe this introductory activity to Brad Johnston. He shared this activity through the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG) listserv.

Present students with the following four sentences:

1) John lived in Nashville for 10 years.
2) John has lived in Nashville for 10 years.
3) When John moved to Amarillo, he had lived in Nashville for 10 years.
4) When John moves to Amarillo, he will have lived in Nashville for 10 years.

What is the meaning conveyed in each statement?

Here are excerpts from Johnston’s explanations:

1.) John lived in Nashville for 10 years (but now lives in Amarillo).

   [The past is anything from the beginning of time until right now. There is no English verb form for the ‘remote past’ or any other kind of past. The past is past.]

2.) John has lived in Nashville for 10 years (and still does).

   [A verb in the present perfect form must have the capacity to be on-going into the present, as does ‘living’ in Nashville.]

3.) When John moved to Amarillo, he had lived in Nashville for 10 years.

   [The past perfect: By the time something happened, something else had already happened, e.g, “When I woke up, the sun had hit the snooze button, and it was raining cats and dogs.”]

4.) When John moves to Amarillo, he will have lived in Nashville for 10 years.

   [The future perfect: By the time something happens, something else will have already happened, e.g, “By June, I will have taken six semesters of physics, which is what I will need to get into graduate school.”]

According to Johnston, “If students understand these four lines, they will know most, maybe all, of what they need to know about the perfect tenses.”