

The Past Continuous and Past Simple



An Upper-Intermediate Grammar Worksheet from Anna Grammar™

The past continuous tense

The past continuous tense is used to describe...

- ...something that was happening at some time in the past. The action had not finished at a particular time in the past.
One year ago I was living in Greece and training for the Olympics.
At nine o'clock I was working out at the gym. (I began working out before 9:00. I was still working out after 9:00.)
- ...something that was happening when another past action was completed. (In doing this, it is used with the past simple.)
I was running in the 1500 metres race when a protester suddenly jumped onto the track.
We were playing tennis when the storm began.

'When' or 'while' are often used to join the clauses together. This shows that the person was in the middle of doing something (the first action) when the second action happened.

- ...two actions in the past that happened at the same time and were continuous.
I was calling out to her while he was running away from me.

Look at this description of an event and see how the past continuous is used.

Last week I saw you twice with your new girlfriend. You were holding hands and smiling at each other. I think your girlfriend dresses quite unusually. On Sunday she had purple hair and was wearing a pink minidress. She was holding a white kitten with a blue bow. But when I saw her with you on Monday she had green hair and was holding a black kitten.*

* Had here is a **state verb**. State verbs do not normally use the continuous tense.

The past continuous tense is **was / were + the present participle**.
(The present participle is the base of a **verb + ing** walk--> walking).

Exercise 1

Answer each question with your own idea. Use the past continuous tense.

- What were you doing this morning at two a.m.? _____
- What was your classmate doing yesterday at six pm? _____
- What was your teacher doing yesterday at 3 pm? _____
- What were you doing at 12.00 o'clock yesterday afternoon? _____
- What were you doing last Wednesday at 8 am? _____

Complete each sentence with your own idea. Use the past continuous tense.

- I _____ when my mobile rang.
- I _____ while I talked to my friend.
- He saw an ambulance when he _____.
- I _____ when I thought I saw a pink elephant.
- They _____ when they heard there was a busdrivers' strike.



The past simple tense.

The past simple tense is used for...

- ...things that happened in the past that have finished. The time of the action is known (i.e. it happened at a specific or definite time) or it is clear from the context.

My coach and I talked about my training last Saturday morning.

My coach said he wanted me to do more speed work.

On Saturday afternoon I did some time trials while he watched me.



- a repeated action in the past. In this way, it is often used to describe past habits.

I went running every morning and worked out at the gym in the afternoon.

When I was young, I dreamt of being an Olympic medallist.

Regular past simple tense verbs end in **-ed**.

I walked around the track before the race.

I waved to my fans in the crowd.

Irregular past simple tense verbs do not end in **-ed**. You need to learn irregular past tense verbs.

I ran faster than anyone else in the race.

I bent forward as I crossed the finishing line.

Exercise 2

Choose the correct form, **past simple** or **past continuous**.

- When you **phoned/were phoning**, I **hoped/was hoping** you would ask me out.
- Did you go out/were you going out** when you **got/ were getting** home from school last night?
No, my friends and I **stayed/ were staying** in and **watched/were watching** television.
- I **thought/was thinking** about what excuse I could use for being late for class when I **realized/was realizing** that it was Sunday and there **was/was being** no class.
- When I last **met/was meeting** you, you **had/were having** pink hair and **wore/were wearing** a suit. You looked great!
- I **played/was playing** tennis at my club when I **thought/was thinking** I **saw/was seeing** Serena Williams.
- Jane and I **went/were going** to a party last night. We **had/were having** a drink when we suddenly **realized/we realizing** we **didn't know/weren't knowing** anyone else at the party! We **were/were being** at the wrong party.

Answer Key:

Exercise 1 (Sample Answers Only)

a. I was finishing my homework., b. He was cooking some rice., c. She was teaching us., d. I was eating lunch with my friends., e. I was getting ready for school., f. I was cleaning up when my mobile rang., g. I was painting my nails while I talked to my friend., h. He saw an ambulance when he was coming to school., i. Last night I was doing my homework when I thought I saw a pink elephant, j. They were waiting at the busstop when they heard there was a busdrivers' strike.

Exercise 2

a. When you phoned, I was hoping you would ask me out.

b. Did you go out when you got home from school last night.

No, my friends and I stayed in and watched television.

c. I was thinking about what excuse I could use for being late for class when I realized that it was Sunday and there was no class.

d. When I last met you, you had pink hair and were wearing a suit. You looked great!

e. I was playing tennis at my club when I thought I saw Serena Williams.

f. Jane and I went to a party last night. We were having a drink when we suddenly realized we didn't know anyone else at the party! We were at the wrong party.