

Past Continuous & Past Simple: Narrative Tenses

INTERMEDIATE

Focus: was/were + -ing structure, Actions in progress at a specific time, Incomplete actions, Ongoing background vs. completed actions, Scene setting in narratives, Short vs. long duration actions, Use of 'when' for interrupting events, Use of 'while' for simultaneous actions, Sequential past events (simple vs. simple), Non-continuous verbs (know, want, like)

1. The Past Continuous: Form and Meaning

We use the Past Continuous to talk about actions that were **in progress** (unfinished) at a specific moment in the past. It sets the scene or describes a "long" action.

Form: Subject + was/were + verb-ing

- *I/He/She/It was working.*
- *You/We/They were working.*
- **Negative:** *I wasn't listening. / They weren't sleeping.*

Usage:

- **Action in progress:** "At 8:00 PM last night, I **was watching** a movie."
 - **Scene Setting:** "The sun **was shining** and the birds **were singing**."
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2. Narrative Tenses: Interaction and Contrast

In stories, we often mix the **Past Continuous** (long actions) and the **Past Simple** (short, completed actions).

A. Interrupted Actions (Long Action vs. Short Action)

We use the Past Continuous for a long background action that is interrupted by a short action in the Past Simple.

- **Structure:** Long Action (Continuous) + **when** + Short Action (Simple)
- **Example:** *I **was having** a shower **when** the phone **rang**.*
 - *(I was in the middle of the shower. The phone ringing interrupted me.)*

B. Simultaneous Actions (Two Long Actions)

We use **while** to show two long actions happening at the same time. Both use Past Continuous.

- **Structure:** **While** + Long Action 1, Long Action 2
- **Example:** ***While** I **was studying**, my brother **was playing** video games.*

C. Sequential Events (Chain of Events)

When one action finishes before the next one starts, we use the **Past Simple** for all verbs.

- **Example:** *He **woke** up, **had** breakfast, and **went** to work.*
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3. Special Case: Stative Verbs (Non-Continuous)

Some verbs describe states, feelings, or thoughts, not physical actions. These verbs **cannot** be used in continuous forms. We must use the **Past Simple**, even if the action happened over a period of time.

- **Verbs:** *know, want, like, love, understand, need, believe, own.*
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Practice Exercises

Instructions: Fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verbs in parentheses. You must choose between the **Past Continuous** (e.g., *was doing*) and the **Past Simple** (e.g., *did*) based on the context, time markers (*when/while*), and verb type (stative verbs).

1. At 7:00 PM yesterday, I _____ (eat) dinner with my family, so I didn't answer the phone.
2. We _____ (drive) down the highway when a deer suddenly _____ (jump) in front of the car.
3. While Sarah _____ (read) a book in the garden, her children _____ (play) with the dog.
4. He _____ (wake) up, _____ (wash) his face, and _____ (brush) his teeth.
5. I _____ (want) to buy the car, but it was too expensive.
6. The sun _____ (shine) and a cool breeze _____ (blow) when we arrived at the beach.
7. She _____ (not/hear) the doorbell because she _____ (listen) to loud music with headphones.
8. When the teacher _____ (walk) into the room, everyone _____ (stop) talking immediately.
9. I _____ (break) my leg while I _____ (ski) in the Alps last winter.
10. He _____ (know) the answer immediately, but he _____ (not/say) anything.
11. While Henry _____ (fix) the computer, I _____ (make) some coffee for us.
12. They _____ (wait) for the bus when it _____ (start) to rain heavily.
13. What _____ (you/do) when the earthquake _____ (happen)?
14. The criminal _____ (escape) while the guard _____ (sleep).
15. I _____ (like) that movie a lot when I saw it last year.

Answer Key

1. **was eating** (Action in progress at a specific time)
2. **were driving / jumped** (Long action interrupted by short action)
3. **was reading / were playing** (Simultaneous long actions using 'while')
4. **woke / washed / brushed** (Sequence of completed events - Past Simple)
5. **wanted** (Stative verb - no continuous form)
6. **was shining / was blowing** (Scene setting/Background actions)
7. **didn't hear / was listening** (Short action / Reason: Long background action)
8. **walked / stopped** (Sequence: The entry caused the silence)
9. **broke / was skiing** (Short action interrupting long action)
10. **knew / didn't say** (Stative verb 'know' / Completed negative action)
11. **was fixing / was making** (Simultaneous actions)
12. **were waiting / started** (Long action interrupted by short action)
13. **were you doing / happened** (Question about activity in progress at moment of interruption)
14. **escaped / was sleeping** (Short event happening during a long background state)
15. **liked** (Stative verb 'like' - no continuous form)