



## PAST SIMPLE V PAST CONTINUOUS

Both the **past simple** and the **past continuous** refer to **completed actions in the past**.

Most of the time when we are talking about such actions, we use the past simple.

- I lived there for 6 years.
- I only found out a few moments ago.
- I asked her but she didn't know anything.
- The company made 100 people redundant last year.
- When I was young I lived in Madrid.

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Only use the **past continuous** when you want to emphasize **the continuity of the action**.

- Everybody was talking about it all evening.
- They were really trying hard but couldn't do it.
- I was thinking about you the other day.
- Were you expecting that to happen?
- When the mother came home her husband was playing with the kids.

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When we use these two forms in the same sentence, we use the **past continuous** to talk about the "**background action**" and the past simple to talk about the **shorter completed action**.

- When the mother came home her husband was playing with the kids.
- It was raining hard when we left the building.
- I was reading the report when you rang.
- He was going out to lunch when I saw him.
- The company was doing well when I last visited it.

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### Use

#### After another or at the same time?

Do you want to express that the actions in the past happened one after another or at the same time?

#### after another –Simple past

Cheryl came home, switched on the computer and checked her e-mails.

#### at the same time –Past Continuous

Simon was playing on the computer while his brother was watching TV.

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#### New action or already in progress?

If you want to express that a new action happened in the middle of another action, you need both tenses: Simple Past for the new action and Past Continuous for the action already in progress.

#### new action

My mobile rang when I was sitting in a meeting.

#### action already in progress

While I was sitting in a meeting, my mobile suddenly rang.

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The following verbs (**stative verbs**) are usually only used in Simple Past (not in the progressive/continuous form). They show a state and not an action.

○ **Existing state/state:** be, cost, fit, mean, suit, seem, appear, depend, include, consist of, exist, contain

○ **Possession:** belong, have, own, need

○ **Sensory perception/senses:** feel, hear, see, smell, taste, touch

○ **Feelings/emotional states:** hate, hope, like, love, prefer, regret, want, wish, detest, envy, dislike, mind, fear

○ **Brain work/thought/mental states:** believe, know, think, understand, assume, consider, suppose, expect, agree, know, remember, forget, doubt, imagine

○ **Introductory clauses for direct speech:** answer, ask, reply, say

## SIGNAL WORDS

### Simple past

- first ....then
- yesterday
- last week
- a month ago
- in 2002
- when

### Past continuous

- when
- while
- as long as

### Simple Past or Past Continuous?

- 1) While Tom (read), Mary (watch) a documentary on TV.
- 2) Marvin (come) home, (switch) on the computer and (check) his emails.
- 3) The thief (sneak) into the house, (steal) the jewels and (leave) without a trace.
- 4) Nobody (listen) while the teacher (explain) the tenses.
- 5) While we (do) a sight-seeing tour, our friends (relax) on the beach.
- 6) He (wake) up and (look) at his watch.

### Simple Past or Past Continuous?

- 1) The receptionist (welcome) the guests and (ask) them to fill in the form.
- 2) The car (break) down and we (have) to walk home.
- 3) The boys (swim) while the girls (sunbathe) .
- 4) My father (come) in, (look) around and (tell) me to tidy up my room.
- 5) As long as one group (prepare) dinner, the others (collect) wood for their campfire.
- 6) While the parents (have) breakfast, their children (run) about.

### Simple Past or Past Continuous?

- 1) We (wait) for Jane, when suddenly Louis (come) around the corner.
- 2) I (cycle) through the park, when I (hear) a strange noise.
- 3) He (pass) her a message when the teacher (look / not) .
- 4) I (fall) asleep while I (watch) TV last night.
- 5) When Mike and Jane (paint) the walls, their dog (knock) over the paint pot.
- 6) Tom (break) his leg when he (play) frisbee.

### Simple Past or Past Continuous?

- 1) When I (do) the washing-up, I (break) a plate.
- 2) While Tom (play) the piano, his mother (do) the washing-up.
- 3) He (drink) some juice and then he (eat) a few chips.
- 4) I (have) dinner when I suddenly (hear) a loud bang.
- 5) When my father (work) in the garden, an old friend (pass) by to see him.
- 6) She (go) to school, (take) out her textbook and (begin) to learn.

## Simple Past or Past Continuous?

- 1) Martha (turn) off the lights and (go) to bed.
- 2) The phone (ring) when I (sit) on the toilet.
- 3) When it (start) to rain, our dog (want) to come inside.
- 4) When Jane (do) a language course in Ireland, she (visit) many castles.
- 5) When I (be) on my way home, I (see) an accident.
- 6) I (not / understand) what they (talk) about.

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## Mix and match

They arrived early while I	while I was watching TV.
Paul cooked dinner while we	were having a glass of wine on the terrace.
The doorbell rang	was still sleeping.
He wrote six novels when	she was driving too fast.
She had a car accident because	he was living in Spain.
We took a lot of photos while the bride and groom	were standing outside the church.



## Complete the stories

I \_\_\_\_\_ Jerry in town this morning but he \_\_\_\_\_ me. In fact, he \_\_\_\_\_ straight past me. I \_\_\_\_\_ into the bank as he \_\_\_\_\_ out. He \_\_\_\_\_ very quickly and not looking where he \_\_\_\_\_. He almost \_\_\_\_\_ into me. He \_\_\_\_\_ to someone on his phone. I think he \_\_\_\_\_ an argument, he \_\_\_\_\_ very angry. Like a lot of people when they talk on their mobile, he \_\_\_\_\_ rather loudly and everybody could hear what he \_\_\_\_\_.

was coming  
was going  
was walking  
was talking  
saw  
walked  
was saying  
didn't see  
bumped  
sounded  
was having  
was going



## Match the questions and answers

What were you doing?	He had to get up early for work.
How long were you waiting?	Just jeans and a T-shirt as usual.
What time did they arrive?	At about ten o'clock.
What was she wearing?	To the bank before it closed.
Where were you rushing off to yesterday when I saw you?	To Sara and Freddie. They are old friends.
Why did he leave so early?	Only ten minutes.
Who were they speaking to when we arrived?	I was repairing my bike.
How long did he stay?	He only stayed a few moments.



## Complete the sentences

He was waiting half an hour before they \_\_\_\_\_. (ARRIVE)  
 He \_\_\_\_\_ me to say they were running late. (PHONE)  
 She \_\_\_\_\_ to Jim on the phone when I walked in. (TALK)  
 How many people \_\_\_\_\_ in the waiting room when you arrived? (SIT)  
 I met them in the street while I \_\_\_\_\_. (SHOP)  
 We were walking down by the river when it \_\_\_\_\_ raining. (START)  
 They \_\_\_\_\_ when they were working in Paris. (MEET)  
 He broke his foot while he \_\_\_\_\_ football on Saturday. (PLAY)  
 I cut my finger while I \_\_\_\_\_ vegetables. (CHOP)  
 I \_\_\_\_\_ at 50 in a 30 zone when I was caught by the speed camera. (DRIVE)  
 The plane \_\_\_\_\_ a little over an hour late. (LEAVE)

1. When I saw Dave, he \_\_\_\_\_.  
 a) is working  
 b) worked  
 c) was working
2. You had a good time at the party, \_\_\_\_\_ you?  
 a) hadn't  
 b) didn't  
 c) weren't
3. \_\_\_\_\_ when the telephone rang?  
 a) Were you sleeping  
 b) Did you sleep  
 c) Were sleeping
4. When \_\_\_\_\_ yesterday morning?  
 a) you got up  
 b) did you get up  
 c) were you getting up
5. While I \_\_\_\_\_ to work, I saw an accident.  
 a) drove  
 b) was driving  
 c) did drive

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#### Sources

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