

Past Continuous Tense

I. RULES AND EXAMPLES

Format: I/he/she/it was verb+ing
We/you/they were verb+ing

1. Interrupted action in the past

Use the Past Continuous to indicate that a longer action in the past was interrupted. The interruption is usually an action in the Simple Past. Remember this can be a real interruption or just an interruption in time.



Examples:

1. I **was watching** TV when she called.
2. When the phone rang, she **was writing** a letter.
3. While we **were having** a picnic, it started to rain.
4. Sally **was working** when Joe had the car accident.
5. When John **was sleeping** last night, someone stole his car.

2. Specific time has an interruption.

In number 1, described above, the Past Continuous is interrupted by an action in the Simple Past. However, you can also use a specific time as an interruption.

Examples:

1. Last night at 6:00 p.m., I **was eating** dinner.
2. At midnight, we **were still driving** through the desert.

IMPORTANT:

In the Simple Past a specific time is used to show when an action began or finished. In the Past Continuous a specific time only interrupts the action.

Examples:

1. Last night at 6:00 p.m., I ate dinner. (I started eating at 6:00 p.m.)
2. Last night at 6:00 p.m., I **was eating** dinner. (I started earlier and at 6:00 p.m., I was in the process of eating dinner.)

3. Parallel actions

When you use the Past Continuous with two actions in the same sentence, it expresses the idea that both actions were happening at the same time. The actions are parallel.

Examples:

1. I **was studying** while he was making dinner.
2. When Ellen **was reading**, Tim **was watching** the television.
3. They **were eating** dinner, **discussing** their plans and **having** a good time.

4. Atmosphere

In English we often use a series of Parallel Actions to describe atmosphere in the past.

Examples:

When I walked into the office, several people **were** busily **typing**, some **were talking** on the phones, the boss **was yelling** directions, and customers **were waiting** to be helped. One customer **was yelling** at a secretary and **waving** his hands. Others **were complaining** to each other about the bad service.

5. Repetition and Irritation with “always”

The Past Continuous with words such as *always* or *constantly* expresses the idea that something irritating or shocking often happened in the past. The concept is very similar to the expression *used to* but with negative emotion. Remember to put the words *always* or *constantly* between "be" and "verb+ing."

Examples:

1. She **was always coming** to class late.
2. He **was constantly talking**. He annoyed everyone.
3. I didn't like them because they **were always complaining**.

II. EXERCISES

What were you doing at these times? Write sentences as in the examples. The past continuous is not always necessary (see the second example).

Examples:

1. (at 8 o'clock yesterday evening) Ans. I was having dinner.
2. (at 5 o'clock last Monday) Ans. I was on a bus on my way home.

Start here:

1. (at 10:15 yesterday morning) Ans. _____.
2. (at 4:30 this morning) Ans. _____.
3. (at 7:45 yesterday evening) Ans. _____.
4. (half an hour ago) Ans. _____.
5. (at 12:30 yesterday noon) Ans. _____.

Use your own ideas to complete the sentences. Use the past continuous.

Example:

Matt phoned in while we _____. Ans. were having dinner.

Start here:

1. The doorbell rang while I _____. Ans. _____.
2. We saw an accident while we _____. Ans. _____.
3. Ann fell asleep while she _____. Ans. _____.
4. The television was on, but nobody _____. Ans. _____.
5. The baby cried while she _____. Ans. _____.

Put the verb into the correct form, past continuous or past simple

Example: Jenny was _____ (wait) for me when I _____ (arrive).

Answer : Jenny was waiting for me when I arrived.

Start here:

1. 'What _____ (you/do) at this time yesterday?' 'I was asleep.'
2. ' _____ (you/go) out last night?' 'No, I was too tired.'
3. How fast _____(you/drive) when the accident (happen)?
4. Sam _____ (take) a photograph of me while I _____ (not/look).
5. We were in a very difficult position. We _____ (not/know) what to do.
6. I haven't seen Alan for ages. When I last _____ (see) him, he _____(try) to find a job.
7. I _____ (walk) along the street when suddenly I _____ (hear) footsteps behind me. Somebody _____ (follow) me. I was scared and I _____ (start) to run.
8. When I was young, I _____ (want) to be a pilot.
9. Last night I _____ (drop) a plate when I _____ (do) the washing up. Fortunately it _____ (not/break).
10. How fast _____ (she/drive) when the police _____ (stop) her?

III. WRITING

Write a paragraph of the things that happened to you this morning. Use the Simple and Continuous Past forms of the verb.

IV. FREE TALKING

Do you think it is important to study English grammar? Why or why not?
Is it possible to learn the English language without studying grammar?
Try to compare your language's grammar to the English grammar: which is more difficult?