

Past continuous and past simple

Reminder → A6–A8, A13

A When we talk about two events or activities that went on over the same period of past time, we can often use the past continuous or the past simple for both:

- Mia **was reading** to the children while Ben **was washing up**. (or ... **read** ... **washed up**.)



Using the past continuous emphasises that the event or activity ('was reading') was in progress during the past period of time ('while Ben was washing up'). Compare:

- When I **was learning** / **learned** to drive I was living with my parents.

Was learning emphasises that the activity was in progress ('I had lessons during this time') and **learned** emphasises completion ('I passed my test during this time').

When we talk about two or more past completed events that followed one another, we use the past simple, not the past continuous, for both (see also Unit 5C):

- She **got** up when the alarm clock **went** off.

B We usually use the past simple rather than the past continuous to talk about repeated past actions:

- We **went** to Spain three times last year.
 Did you drive past her house every day?

However, we can use the past continuous, particularly in spoken English, when we want to emphasise that repeated actions went on for a limited and temporary period of past time:

- When Kata was in hospital, we **were visiting** her twice a day. (or ... we **visited** ...)
 To lose weight before the race, I **wasn't eating** any biscuits for weeks. (or ... I **didn't eat** ...)

or to talk about something that happened surprisingly often:

- Last week I **was having to** bring work home every night to get it all done. (or ... **had** ...)
 When the builders were here I **was making** them cups of tea all the time. (or ... **made** ...)

C We often use the past simple in a narrative (e.g. a report or a story) to talk about a single complete past event and the past continuous to describe the situation that existed at the time. The event might have interrupted the situation, or happened while the situation was in progress:

- Erika **dropped** her bag while she **was getting** into her car.
 She **was shaking** with anger as she **left** the hotel.

D We can use either the past continuous or past simple (or past perfect; see Unit 5E) with some verbs to talk about things we intended to do but didn't:

- We **were meaning** to call in and see you, but Marc wasn't feeling well. (or We **meant** ...)

Also: consider + -ing, expect to, hope to, intend to, plan to / on + -ing, think about / of + -ing, want to

These verbs (with the exception of **mean** and **expect**) and **wonder about** can also be used with the present and past continuous to report what we might do in the future. The past continuous is less definite than the present continuous:

- I **was thinking of** going to China next year, but it depends how much money I've got. (*less definite than I'm thinking of going ...*)
 We **were wondering about** inviting Eva over tomorrow. (*less definite than We're wondering about ...*)

Exercises

- 4.1 Complete the sentences using these pairs of verbs. Use the past simple in one gap and the past continuous in the other. A-D

come – show get – go hope – give live – spend
look – see play – break start – check in

- Just as I was getting into the bath all the lights went off.
- I to go away this weekend, but my boss me some work that I have to finish by Monday.
- When I in Paris, I three hours a day travelling to and from work.
- A friendly American couple chatting to him as he at the hotel reception.
- I bumped into Lena last week. She a lot better than when I last her.
- My boss into the office just as I everyone my holiday photos.
- I badminton four times a week before I my ankle.



This time, use the *same* tense, either past simple or past continuous, in both spaces.

add – taste go off – light not listen – explain push – run not watch – dream

- The smoke alarm when he a candle underneath it.
- I can't remember how to answer this question. I must confess that I while the teacher it to us.
- She more salt to the soup, and then it much better.
- Although the television was on, I it. Instead I about my holidays.
- She open the door and into the room.

- 4.2 Look again at numbers 1, 4, 7 and 11 in 4.1. Which of these sentences could have both verbs in the past simple? What difference in meaning, if any, would there be?

- 4.3 Complete this email with either the past simple or the past continuous form of the verbs in brackets. Where alternatives are possible, think about any difference in meaning. A-C

I (1) (buy) a new alarm clock the other day in Taylor's the jewellers, when I actually (2) (see) somebody shoplifting. I'd just finished paying for my clock and as I (3) (turn) round, an elderly woman (4) (slowly put) a silver plate into a bag that she (5) (carry). Then she (6) (walk) over to another part of the shop and (7) (pick up) an expensive-looking watch a number of times. When she (8) (think) that nobody (9) (look), she (10) (drop) it into the bag. Before I (11) (have) a chance to tell the staff in the shop, she (12) (notice) that I (13) (watch) her and (14) (hurry) out. Unfortunately for her, two police officers (15) (walk) past just at that moment and she (16) (run) straight into them.