

## Past perfect continuous, past perfect and past continuous

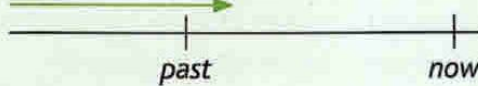
A

We use the past perfect continuous to talk about something that was in progress recently before or up to a past point in time, and the past perfect when we talk about a finished activity before a past time:

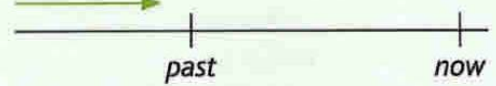
Reminder → A14–A15, A18

- I'd **been finishing** some work in the garden when Lea arrived, so I didn't hear her come in. (*not* I'd finished some work in the garden when Lea arrived, so I didn't hear her come in.) *and*
- I'd **finished** all the ironing so I started cleaning the windows. (*not* I'd been finishing all the ironing so I started cleaning the windows.)

had been finishing



had finished



We can often use either the past perfect continuous or the past perfect with a similar meaning:

- I'd **been working** / I'd **worked** hard all year, so I felt that I deserved a holiday.

B

If we talk about *how many* times something happened in a period up to a particular past time, we use the past perfect, not the past perfect continuous:

- How many times **had** you **met** him before yesterday? (*not* How many times had you been meeting ...)
- I **had stayed** in the hotel twice in the 1990s. (*not* I had been staying in the hotel twice ...)

C

The past perfect continuous can be used to talk about a situation or activity that went on before a particular past time and (i) finished at that time, (ii) continued beyond it, or (iii) finished shortly before it:

- (i) We'd **been driving** for about an hour when the engine suddenly stopped.
- (ii) She felt terrible during the interview because she **had been suffering** from flu since the previous day.
- (iii) When I last saw Omar, he'd **been running** and was out of breath.

If we are not interested in how long the activity went on, we can use the past continuous instead of the past perfect continuous. Compare:

- When the merger was announced it became apparent that the two companies **had been discussing** the possibility *since last year*. *and*
- A friend told me about a conversation she'd recently overheard. Two women **were discussing** their holiday plans ...
- I first met Mateo and Lucia when they **had been going out** together *for five years*, and they didn't get married for another three years after that. *and*
- Karin met Lars when she **was going out** with his best friend.

D

Remember that we don't describe states with continuous tenses (see Unit 1), and we use the past perfect, not the past perfect continuous, even when we focus on the length of a situation up to a particular past time:

- We **had only owned** the car for six weeks when the clutch broke. (*not* We had been owning the car for six weeks ...)

E

The past perfect continuous is mainly used in written texts and is less common in speech. Here is an example in a newspaper article:

- The body of a climber who went missing in the Alps was finally found yesterday. Carl Sims **had been climbing** alone near the Harz Waterfall, which has claimed many lives in the past.

## Exercises

7.1 Complete each pair of sentences using one verb from the box. Use the past perfect continuous if possible; if not, use the past perfect. **A**

apply carry fly work

- 1 a She ..... only ..... for the company for a couple of months, so I was surprised to hear that she'd left.  
b She ..... finally ..... her way up from trainee to a management position, and she celebrated her promotion with a big party.
- 2 a The avalanche ..... them 500 metres down the mountain but no one was hurt.  
b She took a bottle from the bag she ..... all the way from home.
- 3 a We ..... for visas early, but still hadn't got them by the week before the holiday.  
b She ..... for jobs, without success, since leaving university.
- 4 a He ..... all the way from New York to be at yesterday's meeting.  
b When the plane was diverted, shortly after take-off, it ..... from London to Frankfurt.

7.2 Use the past perfect continuous form of the verb in brackets if appropriate; if not, use the past perfect. **B-D**

- 1 Mrs Bishop ..... to have children for years, and only became pregnant at the age of 45. (*try*)
- 2 This was the first time we had been to the castle, even though we ..... Prague a few times before. (*visit*)
- 3 She bought her first watch at the age of eight. It ..... two pounds. (*cost*)
- 4 Emma Willems ..... novels for ten years before she published her first book. (*write*)
- 5 For some time Daniel ..... about passing the exams and eventually decided to change the course he was taking. (*worry*)
- 6 My teacher was really annoyed with me. It was the third time I ..... late for school that week. (*arrive*)
- 7 I ..... always ..... it would be easy to get a job, and was disappointed to be rejected. (*believe*)
- 8 We ..... about Sarah when, to our amazement, she walked through the door. (*talk*)

In which one of the sentences where you have used the past perfect continuous do you think the past continuous is more likely? **C**

7.3 Study this conversation extract. If the italicised verbs are correct, write ✓. If they are wrong, correct them using either the past perfect (active or passive) or past perfect continuous. **A-E**

- A: How was your weekend?  
B: Not great, actually. I (1) *'d really been looking* forward to a relaxing couple of days. But early on Saturday morning Mum phoned to say that Dad (2) *had been taking* ill.  
A: Oh, no! What (3) *had happened*?  
B: She (4) *had just been hearing* that he (5) *had been flown* by helicopter to hospital in Edinburgh from a village called Contin where he (6) *had fished* with my Uncle Mark.  
A: And is he okay? What's wrong with him?  
B: Well, Uncle Mark said that Dad (7) *had been complaining* of a bad headache most of yesterday, but he (8) *hadn't been wanting* to go back to the hotel and spoil the day. But then in the evening, just as they (9) *had stopped* fishing for the day, he (10) *had been collapsing*...