

Past Continuous - Use

When do we use the past continuous tense in English?

Note: This is also called the **past progressive** tense.

As a general rule, we use the **past continuous** to talk about actions that were in progress sometime in the past. The focus is on the process and not on the beginning or completion of the action.

! We do not usually use stative verbs (know, like, own, etc.) in the past continuous.

For example:

- At the time I really liked Transformers. (Not: ~~I was really liking~~)
- We owned a car back then. (Not: ~~We were owning~~)

We use the past continuous for:

1. Actions that were in progress at a specific point in the past

These are things that were happening or unfinished at a time in the past. They started before that time, were in progress at that time, and probably continued after that time. You can state the specific point with a time word or phrase (e.g. yesterday, at 8 am, last Sunday) or with a phrase starting with "when" (e.g. when I arrived, when he came back).

For example:

- At 9 pm last night I **was watching** TV.
- This time last year she **was living** with her parents.
- When I came back, he **was** still **sitting** there.
- When I visited them, they **were painting** their house.
- It **wasn't raining** when the plane landed.
- Where **were** you **working** when you met Daniel?

2. Longer actions interrupted by a shorter action in the past

These are continuous actions interrupted by a sudden event. The action possibly continued after the interruption or possibly stopped.

For example:

- While I **was giving** my presentation, my colleague interrupted me.
- Someone knocked at the door when they **were having** lunch.
- We **were doing** our homework, but then my sister called me.
- As I **was leaving** the house, I tripped and fell.
- **Was** she **cooking** when the phone rang?
- What **were** you **doing** when the earthquake happened?

3. Two actions happening at the same time in the past

This is for two simultaneous unfinished actions.

For example:

- He **was cooking** while I **was setting** the table.
- George **was doing** the dishes and Frank **was playing** video games.
- The students **weren't taking** notes when the professor **was speaking**.
- **Were** you **listening** to a podcast while you **were cleaning**?
- What **were** you **doing** when your friends **were playing** outside?

4. Temporary actions, situations or habits in the past

These are things that lasted for a limited period of time.

Note: We can often use the past simple here as well.

For example:

- I **was studying** in San Francisco that year.
- She **was working** at a café before she found a full-time job.

- We **were playing** golf regularly last year.
- They **weren't smoking** then.
- Where **were** you **living** at the time?

! We usually need to use the past simple with specific periods of time.

For example:

- We played golf for two years. (Not: ~~We were playing golf for two years.~~)
- When I was a kid, we went camping every summer. (Not: ~~When I was a kid, we were going camping every summer.~~)

5. Past trends or changing situations

For example:

- The weather **was getting** colder.
- More and more people **were buying** cars.
- Her books **were becoming** more popular.
- The economy **was not improving**.
- **Was** the price of gold **increasing**?

6. Things that happened frequently that were usually* negative or annoying

Note: It is also usually possible to use the past simple for these things, but the past continuous emphasises the frequent nature of the action.

Here we need an adverb like **always**, **constantly** or **forever**.

For example:

- He **was** always **leaving** his bike in the hallway.
- The students **were** forever **complaining**.
- Diana **was** always **fixing** the computers for us. (*Here it is something positive.)
- Why **were** they constantly **emailing** us?

7. Past fixed plans

These are things that were expected or scheduled at a particular time in the past. Often if we use the past continuous, it means that the plans later changed or did not happen.

For example:

- She **was seeing** her doctor at 3 o'clock today.
- Our bags were near the door because we **were going** to Madrid the next morning.
- I **was meeting** Lisa that afternoon, but she cancelled. (US: canceled)
- The bus **was leaving** at 8 am, but it was delayed by an hour.
- **Were** you **flying** to Sydney the following day?

8. Background description in a story

If a story is told in the past tense, we mainly use the past simple for the main events and the past continuous to give details about the scene or background.

For example:

- It **was snowing** and the people in the street **were wearing** thick coats. Suddenly I saw Charles.
- When the police arrived the band **was playing** and the guests **were dancing**.
- I **was having** lunch with Jessica yesterday and she told me some interesting gossip.

9. Polite requests and suggestions

We sometimes use the past continuous to make requests and suggestions sound more polite and less direct.

For example:

- I **was wondering** if you could help me.
- We **were hoping** to speak to the manager.
- I **was wondering** if you wanted to meet for coffee next week.
- I **was thinking** we could go to the beach today.

Some time words and phrases that we often use with the past continuous:

- when
- while
- as
- still
- at [clock time]
- this time yesterday
- this time last night/week/month/year
- back then, then
- at the time
- that [period of time] (e.g. that year, that summer)
- the next/following [period of time] (e.g. the next day, the following week)