

Simple Past

USE 1 Completed Action in the Past



Use the Simple Past to express the idea that an action started and finished at a specific time in the past. Sometimes, the speaker may not actually mention the specific time, but they do have one specific time in mind.

Examples:

- I **saw** a movie yesterday.
- I **didn't see** a play yesterday.
- Last year, I **traveled** to Japan.
- Last year, I **didn't travel** to Korea.
- **Did you have** dinner last night?
- She **washed** her car.
- He **didn't wash** his car.

USE 2 A Series of Completed Actions



We use the Simple Past to list a series of completed actions in the past. These actions happen 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and so on.

Examples:

- I **finished** work, **walked** to the beach, and **found** a nice place to swim.
- He **arrived** from the airport at 8:00, **checked** into the hotel at 9:00, and **met** the others at 10:00.
- **Did you add** flour, **pour** in the milk, and then **add** the eggs?

USE 3 Duration in the Past



The Simple Past can be used with a duration which started and stopped in the past. A duration is a longer action often indicated by expressions such as: for two years, for five minutes, all day, all year, etc.

Examples:

- I **lived** in Brazil for two years.
- Shauna **studied** Japanese for five years.
- They **sat** at the beach all day.
- They **did not stay** at the party the entire time.
- We **talked** on the phone for thirty minutes.
- A: How long **did** you **wait** for them?
B: We **waited** for one hour.

USE 4 Habits in the Past



The Simple Past can also be used to describe a habit which stopped in the past. It can have the same meaning as "used to." To make it clear that we are talking about a habit, we often add expressions such as: always, often, usually, never, when I was a child, when I was younger, etc.

Examples:

- I **studied** French when I was a child.
- He **played** the violin.
- He **didn't play** the piano.
- **Did** you **play** a musical instrument when you were a kid?
- She **worked** at the movie theater after school.
- They never **went** to school, they always **skipped** class.

USE 5 Past Facts or Generalizations



The Simple Past can also be used to describe past facts or generalizations which are no longer true. As in USE 4 above, this use of the Simple Past is quite similar to the expression "used to."

Examples:

- She **was** shy as a child, but now she is very outgoing.
- He **didn't like** tomatoes before.
- **Did you live** in Texas when you **were** a kid?
- People **paid** much more to make cell phone calls in the past.

Past Continuous

USE 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 a shorter action in the Simple Past. Remember this can be a real interruption or just an interruption in time.

Examples:

- I **was watching** TV when she called.
- When the phone rang, she **was writing** a letter.
- While we **were having** the picnic, it started to rain.
- What **were you doing** when the earthquake started?
- I **was listening** to my iPod, so I didn't hear the fire alarm.
- You **were not listening** to me when I told you to turn the oven off.
- While John **was sleeping** last night, someone stole his car.
- Sammy **was waiting** for us when we got off the plane.
- While I **was writing** the email, the computer suddenly went off.
- A: What **were you doing** when you broke your leg?
B: I **was snowboarding**.

USE 2 Specific Time as an Interruption



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

Examples:

- Last night at 6 PM, I **was eating** dinner.
- At midnight, we **were still driving** through the desert.
- Yesterday at this time, I **was sitting** at my desk at work.

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:

- Last night at 6 PM, I **ate** dinner.
I STARTED EATING AT 6 PM.
- Last night at 6 PM, I **was eating** dinner.
I STARTED EARLIER; AND AT 6 PM, I WAS IN THE PROCESS OF EATING DINNER.

USE 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:

- I **was studying** while he **was making** dinner.
- While Ellen **was reading**, Tim **was watching** television.
- **Were you listening** while he **was talking**?
- I **wasn't paying** attention while I **was writing** the letter, so I made several mistakes.
- What **were you doing** while you **were waiting**?
- Thomas **wasn't working**, and I **wasn't working** either.
- They **were eating** dinner, **discussing** their plans, and **having** a good time.

USE 4 Atmosphere

In English, we often use a series of parallel actions to describe the atmosphere at a particular time in the past.

Example:

- 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.

USE 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:

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

While vs. When

Clauses are groups of words which have meaning, but are often not complete sentences. Some clauses begin with the word "when" such as "when she called" or "when it bit me." Other clauses begin with "while" such as "while she was sleeping" and "while he was surfing." When you talk about things in the past, "when" is most often followed by the verb tense Simple Past, whereas "while" is usually followed by Past Continuous. "While" expresses the idea of "during that time." Study the examples below. They have similar meanings, but they emphasize different parts of the sentence.

Examples:

- I was studying **when she called**.
- **While I was studying**, she called.

REMEMBER Non-Continuous Verbs / Mixed Verbs

It is important to remember that Non-Continuous Verbs cannot be used in any continuous tenses. Also, certain non-continuous meanings for Mixed Verbs cannot be used in continuous tenses. Instead of using Past Continuous with these verbs, you must use Simple Past.

Examples:

- Jane **was being** at my house when you arrived. *Not Correct*
- Jane **was** at my house when you arrived. *Correct*

ADVERB PLACEMENT

The examples below show the placement for grammar adverbs such as: always, only, never, ever, still, just, etc.

Examples:

- You were **just** studying when she called.
- Were you **just** studying when she called?

ACTIVE / PASSIVE

Examples:

- The salesman **was helping** the customer when the thief came into the store. *ACTIVE*
- The customer **was being helped** by the salesman when the thief came into the store. *PASSIVE*