

Past simple vs past continuous

GRAMMAR

LEVEL
Intermediate

NUMBER
B1_1022G_EN

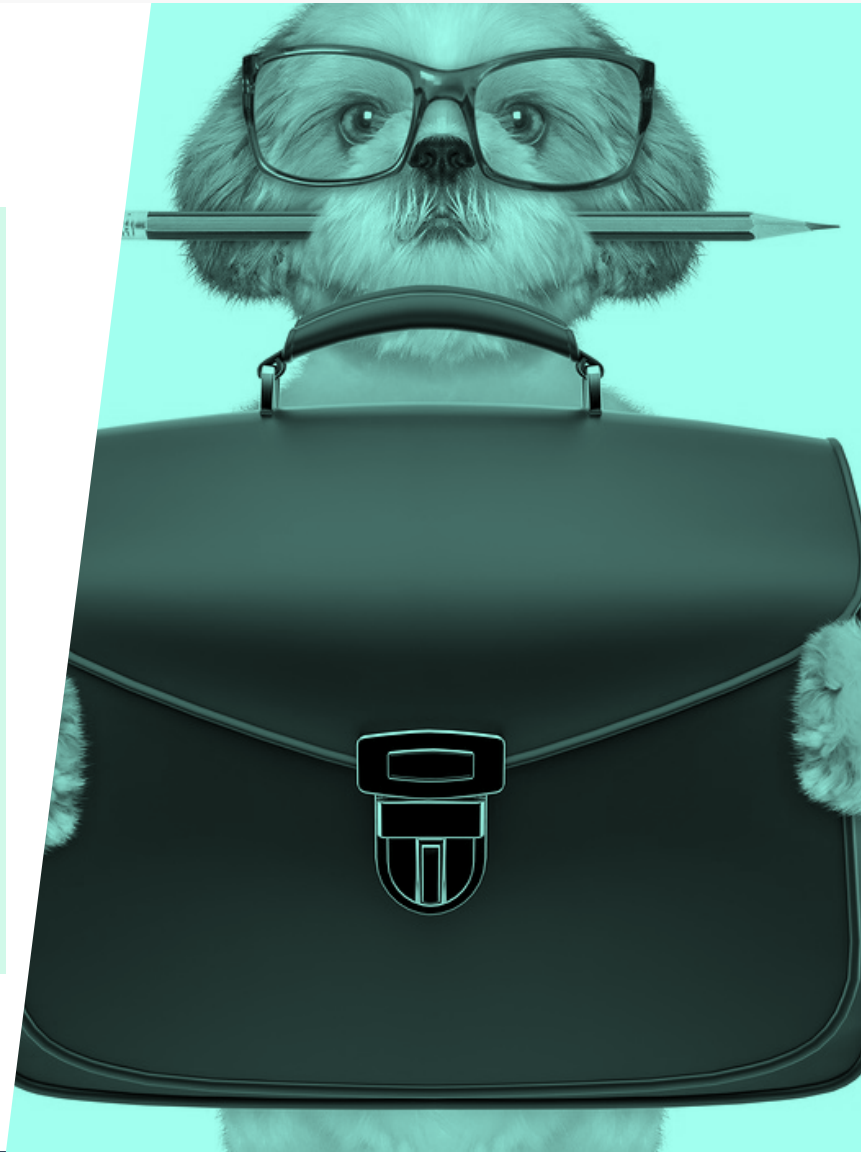
LANGUAGE
English





Goals

- Review the past simple and learn the past continuous
- Learn the difference between the past simple and the past continuous
- Practise using the conjunctions *when* and *while*



I **travelled** to Paris to attend a conference.

It **was raining** in Paris while I **attended** the conference.

Let's learn how to use the **past simple** and the **past continuous**.



Past simple

When do we use the **past simple**
in English?

What might this tense be
useful for?

Discuss with your teacher.



Review: past simple

We use the **past simple** when we want to say that an **action occurred** in the **past**. It is the basic form of the past tense in English.

- For regular verbs add **-ed**.
- Irregular verbs have their own forms – these need to be memorised.



Jules **lived** in Paris last year.
We **attended** the meeting yesterday.



Past continuous: structure

- The table below shows how the **past continuous** is constructed.
- The auxiliary verb is **to be** in **past simple**.

subject	aux verb: <i>to be</i> (past simple)	- <i>ing</i> form of the verb + remainder of sentence
I	was	practising my English.
You	were	giving a presentation.
He/she/it	was	standing in the hallway.
We	were	talking to our boss.
You	were	driving down the road.
They	were	participating in a meeting.



Transform the past continuous sentences into past simple

1. Julie was writing a report.

→ Julie **wrote** a report.

2. Wilfred was making a cup of coffee.

→ _____

3. You were doing really well!

→ _____

4. I was organising a business trip.

→ _____

5. We were working from home.

→ _____



Past continuous with past simple

The table below shows the structure of the **past continuous** when it is used together with the **past simple**.

- We use the following structure:
 - **subject + auxiliary verb + -ing form of verb + conjunction + past simple**

- I **was working** when you **came** to my desk.
- He **was eating** when the phone **rang**.
- They **were** already **sitting** in the room before the meeting **started**.





Past continuous: use

- The **past continuous** is commonly used to talk about something that was happening at a **particular time in the past**.
- Past continuous sentences often include the **past simple** tense. The **past simple** describes the **action** while the **past continuous** describes the **longer activity in the background**.
- Often, the action in the **past simple** part of the sentence **interrupts** the action described in the **past continuous** tense.

- **I was just opening the door** when the cat leapt on the mouse.

In this sentence the past continuous describes what was happening in the background (*opening the door*) as the main action happened (*the cat leapt on the mouse*).

- **The cat was leaping on the mouse** when David opened the door.

The focus of this sentence is different. The main action in this sentence is David opening the door, which is in past simple.



Past continuous: examples

- Read more examples of the **past continuous** below.

- I **was walking** to the station when the message came through.
- John **was eating** an apple while we talked.
- I **was working** on my computer when the power went off.
- I **was downloading** new software when my computer broke.
- In 2014 I **was working** at a different company.
- At 8 p.m. last night I **was working** overtime.



Complete the sentences

Complete the sentences with a past continuous construction.

E.g. I _____ [*listen*]. → I was listening.

1. John _____ [*walk*] home when he received a phone call.

2. I _____ [*leave*] the gym when it started to rain.

3. At 8 a.m., Jane _____ [*drive*] to work.

4. They _____ [*have*] a meeting when she walked into the room.

5. I _____ [*wait*] for the train when I got offered the job.



Categorise

Categorise the phrases below.

I was just cleaning
my shoes...

When Tom was
getting a haircut...

I was driving to
work...

I was eating my
lunch...

...when something
tapped on the
window.

I met Sally...

...while I was living
abroad.

...he decided to
quit his job.

past continuous

past simple



Negative form

- The **negative form** of the past continuous adds the word **not** between the **auxiliary verb** (in this case *to be*) and the **main verb**.
- **subject + auxiliary verb + not + -ing form of the verb + rest of sentence**
- Remember that:
 - **was not** can contract to **wasn't**
 - **were not** can contract to **weren't**

- I **wasn't** working when you came to my desk.
- He **was not** eating when the phone rang.
- They **were not** sitting in the room before the meeting started.





Rewrite these sentences in the negative form

1. Jean was eating her breakfast when her boss rang.



2. The restaurant was closing as Andrew arrived.



3. The meeting room was emptying when she walked in.



4. They were presenting when the fire alarm went off.



5. She was designing a process for booking meeting rooms.





Forming questions



- To form a question in the past continuous, you need to switch the **auxiliary verb** and **the subject**.
- **auxiliary verb + subject + -ing form of the verb + rest of sentence**

- **Were you** working when I came to your desk?
- **Was he** eating when the phone rang?
- **Were they** sitting in the meeting room?





Now rewrite the sentences from p. 14 in question form

1. Jean was eating her breakfast when her boss rang.



2. The restaurant was closing as Andrew arrived.



3. The meeting room was emptying when she walked in.



4. They were presenting when the fire alarm went off.



5. She was designing a process for booking meeting rooms.





When and while

- The conjunctions **when** and **while** are useful when forming sentences with the **past continuous**.
- Introducing a clause with **when** can indicate the **past simple** part of the sentence.

- I was eating my lunch **when** my boss decided to talk to me.

Alternatively, we can **invert the sentence so the past simple part comes first**.

- **When** my boss decided to talk to me, I was eating my lunch.





Complete the sentences

Complete these sentences with your own ideas.

I was leaving
the office
when...

He arrived at
the meeting
when...

I was applying
for a new job
when...

I was meeting a
new client
when...

She was eating
lunch when...

I was writing an
e-mail when...

A vertical sheet of lined paper with a spiral binding on the left side, intended for writing answers.



Long actions and interruptions

- The **past continuous** is useful when **describing a long action** in the **past**.
- It helps us to specify when the **action starts** and **ends**.

For example:

- Yesterday at 3 p.m., I was preparing my presentation.
I started preparing before 3 p.m. and finished sometime after.

The **past continuous** can also be used to **describe a long action** that was **interrupted** by a **shorter action**.

- I was sleeping soundly when the doorbell woke me up.

In this example, the **past simple** part of the sentence (*the doorbell woke me up*) **interrupts** the **past continuous** action (*I was sleeping soundly*).



Inverting and the use of *while* and *when*

These sentences can also be **inverted** or **switched around**.

- I was eating my lunch **when** I received the news.

This sentence can be inverted:

- **When** I received the news, I was eating my lunch.

We can also use the conjunction **while** to introduce the **past continuous** part of a sentence.

These sentences can also be **inverted** or **switched around**.

- I really got into cycling **while** I was working at a bike-sharing startup.
- **While** I was working at a bike-sharing startup, I really got into cycling.



Adding conjunctions

Connect the sentences below using *while* or *when*.

1. I was visiting Sydney. I had to participate in meetings via video call.
2. Jane was dancing. David laughed.
3. Sally was presenting. The CEO walked into the room.
4. Richard was working in London. Chloe moved to Shanghai.
5. Samuel went to the office. His wife was resting at home.



Negativity

The **past continuous** can also be used with *always* to describe a **repeated action** in a **negative way**.

- **Always** can be used to describe **negative** or **annoying** habits or actions.
- It is **passing judgement** on someone or something when it is **associated** with **negativity**.

Examples:

- Jane was **always** running late for work.
- My boss was **always** talking to me rudely.
- Meetings with the Head of Operations were **always** running over time.



Talk to the teacher

David is not a good colleague.

Your former colleague David had a few annoying habits.

Use the past continuous to tell your teacher what annoyed you about David.

Remember that this structure is **negative** and passes judgement on another, so be aware of the context you use it in.

David **was** always **running** late for meetings.



Uses of past continuous

In which situations might it be useful to use the **past continuous**?

Discuss your ideas.



Two actions at the same time

Think about your day so far. Try to write some sentences about two actions happening at the same time, and make these related to your day.

Use the past continuous and past simple in your sentences.

A sheet of white lined paper with a blue vertical margin on the left side. The paper has several horizontal lines for writing, intended for the user to practice writing sentences.

Example

I was having a shower
when the water suddenly
went cold.





Reflect on the goals

Go back to the second slide of the lesson and check if you have achieved all the goals of the lesson.

yes

no



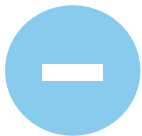


Reflect on this lesson

Think about everything you have seen in this lesson.
What were the most difficult activities or words? The easiest?









If you have time, go over
the most difficult slides again





Answer key (1/2)

Exercise p. 7

2. Wilfred **made** a cup of coffee.
3. You **did** really well!
4. I **organised** a business trip.
5. We **worked** from home.

Exercise p. 11

1. was walking, 2. was leaving, 3. was driving, 4. were having, 5. was waiting

Exercise p. 12

Past continuous: I was just cleaning my shoes..., When Tom was getting a haircut..., I was driving to work..., I was eating my lunch..., ...while I was living abroad.
Past simple: ...when something tapped on the window, I met Sally..., ...he decided to quit his job.

Exercise p. 14

1. Jeanie **was not** eating her breakfast when her boss rang.
2. The restaurant **was not** closing as Andrew arrived.
3. The meeting room **was not** empty when she walked in.
4. They **were not** presenting when the fire alarm went off.
5. She **was not** designing a process for booking meeting rooms.



Answer key (2/2)

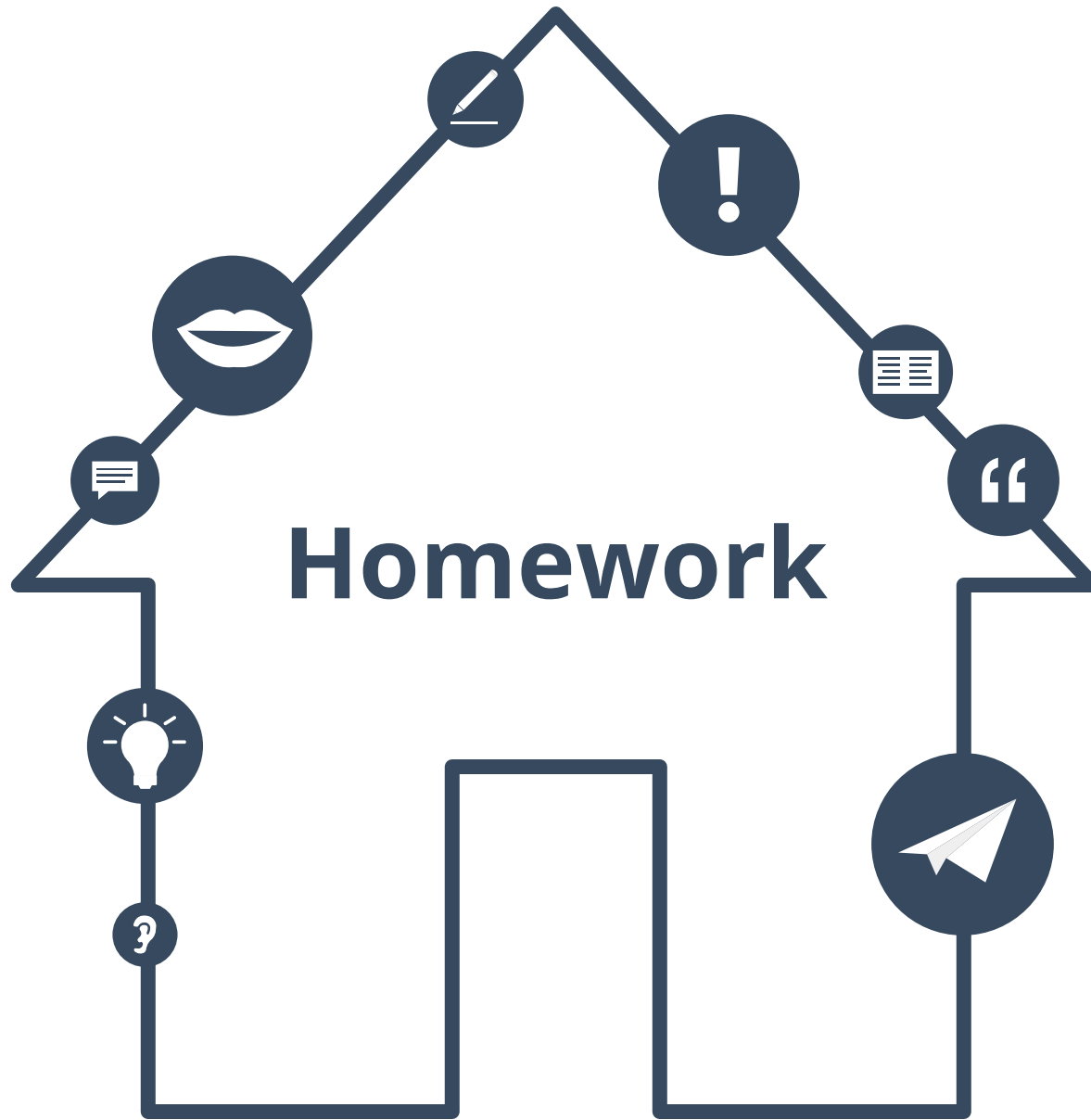
Exercise p. 21

Example correct answers include:

1. **While** I was visiting Sydney, I had to participate in meetings via video call.
2. David laughed **when** Jane was dancing.
3. **While** Sally was presenting, the CEO walked into the room.
4. Richard was working in London **when** Chloe moved to Shanghai.
5. Samuel went to the office **while** his wife was resting at home.

Exercise p. 16

1. Was Jean eating breakfast when her boss rang?
2. Was the restaurant closing as Andrew arrived?
3. Was the meeting room empty when she walked in?
4. Were they presenting when the fire alarm went off?
5. Was she designing a process for booking meeting rooms?





Matching

Match the following sentence parts to make them whole.

1. I was walking through the park...

a. ...when the phone rang.

2. When I remembered I'd forgotten my swimsuit...

b. ...my girlfriend was already getting ready for work.

3. James was eating his dinner...

c. ...when I spotted a family of squirrels.

4. When I woke up this morning...

d. ...it was too late to go home and get it.



Structure practice

Write sentences using the connectors *when* and *while* to practise using these structures.

Try to use both the **past continuous** and **past simple** together in your sentences.

I met her unexpectedly when I went to the supermarket.



Homework answer key

Exercise p. 31
1c, 2d, 3a, 4b

