

Both the past simple and the past continuous refer to completed actions in the past.

Most of the time when we are talking about such actions, we use the past simple.

- a) I lived there for 6 years.
- b) I only found out a few moments ago.
- c) I asked her but she didn't know anything.
- d) The company made 100 people redundant last year.
- e) When I was young I lived in Madrid.



Only use the **past continuous** when you want to emphasize **the continuity of the action.**

- a) Everybody was talking about it all evening.
- b) They were really trying hard but couldn't do
- c) I was thinking about you the other day.
- d) Were you expecting that to happen?
- e) When the mother came home her husband was playing with the kids.

When we use these two forms in the same sentence, we use the **past continuous** to talk about the "background action" and the past simple to talk about the shorter completed action.

- a) When the mother came home her husband was playing with the kids.
- b) It was raining hard when we left the building.
- c) I was reading the report when you rang.
- d) He was going out to lunch when I saw him.
- e) The company was doing well when I last visited it.

Use

After another or at the same time?

Do you want to express that the actions in the past happened one after another or at the same time?

after another -Simple past

Cheryl came home, switched on the computer and checked her e-mails.

at the same time -Past Continuous Simon was playing on the computer while his brother was watching TV.

New action or already in progress?

If you want to express that a new action happened in the middle of another action, you need both tenses: Simple Past for the new action and Past Continuous for the action already in progress.

new action

My mobile rang when I was sitting in a meeting.

action already in progress

While I was sitting in a meeting, my mobile suddenly rang.

The following verbs (**stative verbs**) are usually only used in Simple Past (not in the progressive/continuous form). They show a state and not an action.

 $\circ\textbf{Existing state/state:}$ be, cost, fit, mean, suit, seem, appear, depend, include, consist of, exist, contain

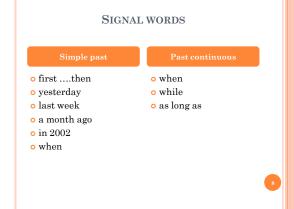
oPossession: belong, have, own, need

 $\circ\mathbf{Sensory}$ perception/senses: feel, hear, see, smell, taste, touch

oFeelings/emotional states: hate, hope, like, love, prefer, regret, want, wish, detest, envy, dislike, mind, fear

oBrain work/thought/mental states: believe, know, think, understand, assume, consider, suppose, expect, agree, know, remember, forget, doubt, imagine

oIntroductory clauses for direct speech: answer, ask, reply, say



Simple Past or Past Continuous?

- 1) While Tom (read), Mary (watch) a documentary on TV.
- 2) Marvin (come) home, (switch) on the computer and (check) his emails.
- 3) The thief (sneak) into the house, (steal) the jewels and (leave) without a trace.
- 4) Nobody (listen) while the teacher (explain) the tenses.
- 5) While we (do) a sight-seeing tour, our friends (relax) on the beach.
- 6) He (wake) up and (look) at his watch.

Simple Past or Past Continuous?

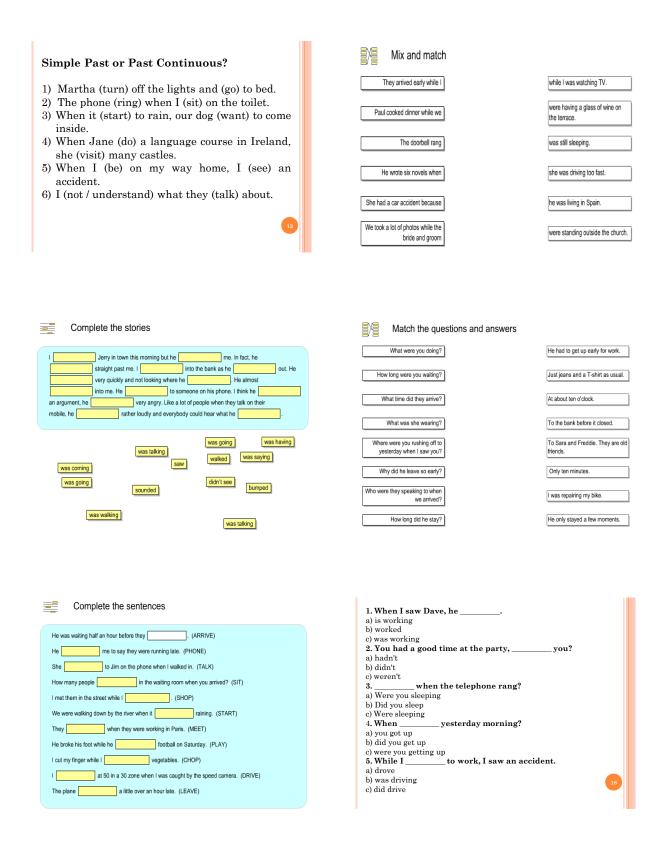
- 1) The receptionist (welcome) the guests and (ask) them to fill in the form.
- The car (break) down and we (have) to walk home.
- 3) The boys (swim) while the girls (sunbathe).
- My father (come) in, (look) around and (tell) me to tidy up my room.
- 5) As long as one group (prepare) dinner, the others (collect) wood for their campfire.
- 6) While the parents (have) breakfast, their children (run) about.

Simple Past or Past Continuous?

- 1) We (wait) for Jane, when suddenly Louis (come) around the corner.
- 2) I (cycle) through the park, when I (hear) a strange noise.
- He (pass) her a message when the teacher (look / not).
- 4) I (fall) asleep while I (watch) TV last night.
- 5) When Mike and Jane (paint) the walls, their dog (knock) over the paint pot.
- 6) Tom (break) his leg when he (play) frisbee.

Simple Past or Past Continuous?

- 1) When I (do) the washing-up, I (break) a plate.
- 2) While Tom (play) the piano, his mother (do) the washing-up.
- He (drink) some juice and then he (eat) a few chips.
- 4) I (have) dinner when I suddenly (hear) a loud bang.
- 5) When my father (work) in the garden, an old friend (pass) by to see him.
- 6) She (go) to school, (take) out her textbook and (begin) to learn.



Sources

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