

PAST SIMPLE V PAST CONTINUOUS

Michela Giordano
mgiordano@unica.it

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.

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

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

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

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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**.

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

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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.

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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.

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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.

○ **Existing state/state:** be, cost, fit, mean, suit, seem, appear, depend, include, consist of, exist, contain

○ **Possession:** belong, have, own, need

○ **Sensory perception/senses:** feel, hear, see, smell, taste, touch

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

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

○ **Introductory clauses for direct speech:** answer, ask, reply, say

SIGNAL WORDS

Simple past

- firstthen
- yesterday
- last week
- a month ago
- in 2002
- when

Past continuous

- when
- while
- as long as

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.
- 2) The car (break) down and we (have) to walk home.
- 3) The boys (swim) while the girls (sunbathe) .
- 4) 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.
- 3) 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.
- 3) 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.

Simple Past or Past Continuous?

- 1) Martha (turn) off the lights and (go) to bed.
- 2) The phone (ring) when I (sit) on the toilet.
- 3) When it (start) to rain, our dog (want) to come inside.
- 4) When Jane (do) a language course in Ireland, she (visit) many castles.
- 5) When I (be) on my way home, I (see) an accident.
- 6) I (not / understand) what they (talk) about.

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Mix and match

They arrived early while I	while I was watching TV.
Paul cooked dinner while we	were having a glass of wine on the terrace.
The doorbell rang	was still sleeping.
He wrote six novels when	she was driving too fast.
She had a car accident because	he was living in Spain.
We took a lot of photos while the bride and groom	were standing outside the church.



Complete the stories

I _____ Jerry in town this morning but he _____ me. In fact, he _____ straight past me. I _____ into the bank as he _____ out. He _____ very quickly and not looking where he _____. He almost _____ into me. He _____ to someone on his phone. I think he _____ an argument, he _____ very angry. Like a lot of people when they talk on their mobile, he _____ rather loudly and everybody could hear what he _____.

was coming was talking was going was having
 was going saw walked was saying
 was walking sounded didn't see bumped
 was talking



Match the questions and answers

What were you doing?	He had to get up early for work.
How long were you waiting?	Just jeans and a T-shirt as usual.
What time did they arrive?	At about ten o'clock.
What was she wearing?	To the bank before it closed.
Where were you rushing off to yesterday when I saw you?	To Sara and Freddie. They are old friends.
Why did he leave so early?	Only ten minutes.
Who were they speaking to when we arrived?	I was repairing my bike.
How long did he stay?	He only stayed a few moments.



Complete the sentences

He was waiting half an hour before they _____. (ARRIVE)
 He _____ me to say they were running late. (PHONE)
 She _____ to Jim on the phone when I walked in. (TALK)
 How many people _____ in the waiting room when you arrived? (SIT)
 I met them in the street while I _____. (SHOP)
 We were walking down by the river when it _____ raining. (START)
 They _____ when they were working in Paris. (MEET)
 He broke his foot while he _____ football on Saturday. (PLAY)
 I cut my finger while I _____ vegetables. (CHOP)
 I _____ at 50 in a 30 zone when I was caught by the speed camera. (DRIVE)
 The plane _____ a little over an hour late. (LEAVE)

1. When I saw Dave, he _____.
 a) is working
 b) worked
 c) was working
2. You had a good time at the party, _____ you?
 a) hadn't
 b) didn't
 c) weren't
3. _____ when the telephone rang?
 a) Were you sleeping
 b) Did you sleep
 c) Were sleeping
4. When _____ yesterday morning?
 a) you got up
 b) did you get up
 c) were you getting up
5. While I _____ to work, I saw an accident.
 a) drove
 b) was driving
 c) did drive

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Sources

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