

During vs while

CEFR B1 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

During + noun answers when; while + subject and verb answers what else was happening at the same time.

The rule

During + noun

- During is followed by a noun phrase: during the lesson, during the summer, during the night, during my holiday.
- It answers the question when, and it points to a period of time.
- Do not put a clause after during: "during I was away" is wrong.
- During can sit at the start or in the middle: "During the break, we talked" and "We talked during the break".

While + subject and verb

- While joins a clause with its own subject and verb: "while I was cooking", "while she studied".
- It answers the question what else was happening at that time.
- The main action is often shorter and interrupts the while action: "I got a text while I was driving".
- While can also contrast two facts: "While I like tea, I prefer coffee."

While + -ing

- When the subject of both parts is the same, while can take an -ing form: "While cooking, I listened to the radio."
- The full clause and the -ing form mean the same: "While I was cooking, I listened to the radio."
- Use the -ing form only when both actions share one subject, or the meaning becomes confusing.
- After during, the -ing form works as a noun: "During cooking, the phone rang."

During or for?

- During says when something happened inside a period: "I fell asleep during the film."
- For says how long something lasted: "I slept for two hours."
- For answers "how long?"; during answers "when inside that period?".
- Both can appear in one sentence: "I slept for two hours during the flight."

While or when?

- While is for longer background actions: "While we were waiting, it started to rain."
- When is for a moment or a complete action: "When the rain started, we went inside."
- Both words fit many sentences, but while emphasises duration and when emphasises the moment.

- With two short actions, when is the natural choice: "When she called, I answered."

Questions

Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. I met Anna ___ the conference.

2. The phone rang ___ I was taking a shower.

3. He slept ___ the whole flight.

4. Please turn off your phone ___ the exam.

5. ___ I was walking home, it started to snow.

6. We talked ___ the break.

7. She read a book ___ she waited for the train.

8. I stayed in Rome ___ five days.

9. ___ cooking, I listened to the radio.

10. The lights went out ___ the storm.

11. He called me ___ I was having lunch.

12. No talking ___ the film, please.

13. ___ we were waiting, the manager came out.

14. I learned a lot ___ my stay in Dublin.

15. The children played outside ___ their parents cooked.

16. I did not sleep at all ___ the night.

17. She fell and hurt her knee ___ she was running.

18. Prices went up ___ the summer.

19. I sent three emails ___ I was on the train.

20. Do not use your phone ___ the lesson.

Answer key

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1. **during** — A noun phrase follows the gap, so during is the preposition that fits.
2. **while** — A clause with a subject and verb follows, so while is needed.
3. **during** — During + the noun phrase the whole flight points to the period.
4. **during** — During introduces the period of the exam.
5. **While** — The clause I was walking needs the conjunction while.
6. **during** — The break is a noun, so during is the correct preposition.
7. **while** — While joins the two clauses about the same time.
8. **for** — For answers how long; during and while do not measure a length of time.
9. **While** — While + -ing works when both actions share the same subject.
10. **during** — The storm is a noun phrase, and during points to the period.
11. **while** — The clause I was having lunch needs while.
12. **during** — The film is the noun period, so during is correct.
13. **While** — A full clause follows, so while introduces the background action.
14. **during** — My stay is a noun phrase, so during fits.
15. **while** — While joins two actions happening at the same time.
16. **during** — The night is a noun period, so during is the correct preposition.
17. **while** — The clause she was running needs while.
18. **during** — The summer is a noun phrase, so during introduces the period.
19. **while** — While joins the clause about the train journey to the email action.
20. **during** — The lesson is a noun, so during is the preposition needed.