

Past continuous

CEFR A2-B1 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

Was or were plus -ing: the action in progress, the interruption, and the background of a story.

The rule

The form: was or were plus -ing

- Positive: I was working. You were working. He was working. We were working. They were working.
- Negative: add not after was or were. I was not listening. They were not sleeping.
- Question: put was or were before the subject. Was she studying? What were you doing?
- Short answers repeat the auxiliary only: "Were they waiting?" "Yes, they were."
- The -ing form never changes: it is always was or were plus the -ing verb, with no did.

An action in progress at a past moment

- The tense answers the question "what was happening at that time?".
- "At eight o'clock this morning, I was driving to work." The journey was in progress at eight.
- Time expressions are common: at eight o'clock, at midnight, all morning, this time yesterday.
- Both the start and the end of the action are outside the picture. We only see the middle.

Interrupted actions: the classic pair

- A longer background action uses the past continuous. A shorter event that interrupts it uses the past simple.
- "I was having a shower when the doorbell rang." The shower was in progress; the bell rang once.
- The order of the clauses does not matter: "When the doorbell rang, I was having a shower."
- Usually the past continuous clause comes first, but the past simple event is the new information.

Two actions at the same time

- When two longer actions happen together, both verbs can be past continuous.
- Use while to join them: "She was cooking while I was cleaning."
- While often signals the past continuous; when often signals the interrupting past simple event.
- Two actions can also be connected with and: "He was reading and listening to music."

Background description and stative verbs

- Stories open with the past continuous to set the scene: "The sun was shining and the birds were singing."
- Use the past continuous for the atmosphere, then switch to the past simple for the events.
- Stative verbs usually stay in the past simple, even about the past: know, want, like, need, believe, understand, remember.

- Say "I knew the answer", not "I was knowing the answer". Say "She wanted to leave", not "She was wanting to leave".

Questions

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

1. At nine o'clock last night, I ___ a film.

2. They ___ tennis when it started to rain.

3. What ___ you doing at eight this morning?

4. She ___ the dishes while I dried them.

5. He ___ when the alarm rang.

6. While we ___ dinner, the lights went out.

7. The children ___ in the garden all afternoon.

8. I ___ my keys when I met her.

9. It ___ heavily, so we stayed at home.

10. At midnight, they ___ still working.

11. The cat ___ on the sofa when I came in.

12. We ___ for the bus when the taxi appeared.

13. She ___ not listening when I explained the rule.

14. I hurt my back while I ___ the boxes.

15. When the phone rang, I ___ the answer.

16. Why ___ crying?

17. I ___ about you when you called.

18. While he ___ a book, someone knocked on the door.

19. The teacher ___ when the bell rang.

20. While I was cooking, she ___ the table.

Answer key

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1. **was watching** — The film was in progress at nine o'clock, so the past continuous is needed: was watching.
2. **were playing** — The tennis was the longer background action. Use the past continuous: were playing.
3. **were** — The past continuous question is formed with were before you: What were you doing?
4. **was washing** — While introduces an action in progress, so the past continuous fits: was washing.
5. **was sleeping** — He was in the middle of sleeping when the alarm interrupted. Use was sleeping.
6. **were having** — The dinner was in progress when the lights went out. Were having is the past continuous for we.
7. **were playing** — An activity continuing through the afternoon takes the past continuous: were playing.
8. **was looking for** — The search was in progress when the meeting interrupted it: was looking for.
9. **was raining** — The rain was the background situation. The past continuous describes it: was raining.
10. **were** — They takes were. The sentence describes work in progress at midnight: were still working.
11. **was sleeping** — The cat was in the middle of sleeping, so the past continuous is correct: was sleeping.
12. **were waiting** — Waiting was in progress when the taxi appeared. Use were waiting with we.
13. **was** — The negative past continuous is was not plus -ing: she was not listening.
14. **was moving** — While introduces the longer action in progress. With I, use was moving.
15. **knew** — Know is a stative verb, so it stays in the past simple: I knew the answer.
16. **was she** — In a past continuous question, was comes before the subject: Why was she crying?
17. **was thinking** — The thought was in progress at the moment of the call: was thinking. With I, was is the auxiliary.
18. **was reading** — The reading was the background action interrupted by the knock: was reading.
19. **was talking** — The teacher was in the middle of talking when the bell interrupted: was talking.
20. **was setting** — Two actions were happening at the same time, so both take the past continuous. With she, use was setting.