

Past perfect continuous: had been doing

CEFR B1-B2 • 20 questions • A4 / US Letter

Had been plus -ing describes an activity that was in progress before another past moment. It stresses the duration, not the finished result.

The rule

The form and the timeline

- The form is had been plus the -ing verb: "She had been working."
- All subjects take had: I had been, she had been, they had been.
- The action started before a past moment and continued up to it.
- The second event usually appears in the past simple: "when I arrived".

Why not just the past continuous?

- Past continuous: "She was working when I arrived" describes the moment.
- Past perfect continuous: "She had been working for hours when I arrived" adds duration before the moment.
- The past perfect continuous reaches further back.
- Both put the action in progress; the perfect form adds how long.

Duration, cause and visible results

- Duration with for and since: "We had been driving for six hours."
- Cause of a later state: "He was tired because he had been running."
- Visible evidence: "The ground was wet; it had been raining."
- The activity may have just stopped or may still continue.

Continuous versus perfect simple

- The continuous stresses the activity: "She had been painting the wall."
- The simple stresses the finished result: "She had painted the wall."
- The continuous answers how long; the simple answers how many or how much.
- With stative verbs, use the simple form: "I had known him for years."

Common traps

- Do not use the present perfect continuous for a past-before-past timeline.
- The negative is had not been: "They had not been waiting long."
- The question puts had first: "Had you been waiting long?"
- Do not use the continuous with a count: "She had written three letters" is correct.

Questions

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

1. She ___ for hours when I arrived.

2. They ___ all night before they stopped.

3. He was tired because he ___.

4. The ground was wet; it ___.

5. We ___ for an hour when the bus came.

6. I ___ well before the holiday.

7. ___ you been waiting long?

8. She ___ the wall all morning.

9. He ___ her for years before they married.

10. They ___ in Rome for two years when the baby was born.

11. The team ___ hard, so they deserved the win.

12. She was out of breath because she ___.

13. The children ___ since lunchtime.

14. I realized I ___ in the wrong direction.

15. How long ___ they been living there?

16. He ___ for the company for ten years before he left.

17. The road was icy because it ___.

18. She ___ for the exam all week.

19. They ___ for two hours before the doctor saw them.

20. I ___ that book for months before I finished it.

Answer key

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1. **had been working** — The past perfect continuous had been working shows the activity before my arrival.
2. **had been driving** — The duration before a past event takes had been driving.
3. **had been running** — The past perfect continuous had been running explains the earlier cause.
4. **had been raining** — The evidence points to an activity before the past moment, so had been raining fits.
5. **had been waiting** — For an hour with a past moment takes the past perfect continuous had been waiting.
6. **had not been sleeping** — The negative past perfect continuous is had not been sleeping.
7. **Had** — The question puts had before the subject in the past perfect continuous.
8. **had been painting** — All morning stresses the duration of the activity, so had been painting fits.
9. **had known** — The stative verb know avoids the continuous, so the past perfect simple had known is correct.
10. **had been living** — The continuing situation before the birth takes had been living.
11. **had been training** — The past perfect continuous had been training explains the later result.
12. **had been cycling** — The earlier activity that caused the state takes had been cycling.
13. **had been playing** — Since lunchtime before a past moment takes had been playing.
14. **had been walking** — The walking continued up to the moment of realizing, so had been walking fits.
15. **had** — The past perfect continuous question uses had before the subject.
16. **had been working** — For ten years before a past event takes had been working.
17. **had been snowing** — The cause of the ice is a past perfect continuous activity, had been snowing.
18. **had been revising** — All week stresses the longer activity, so had been revising fits.
19. **had been waiting** — The past perfect continuous had been waiting covers the time before the doctor saw them.
20. **had been reading** — For months before a past event takes the past perfect continuous had been reading.