

Past simple vs past continuous

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

The event or the background: choosing the right past tense, and how when and while help.

The rule

The past simple: events, facts and sequences

- Use the past simple for a finished action: "I watched the match last night."
- Use it for a sequence of events: "She opened the door, put down her bag and sat on the sofa."
- Use it for repeated past habits: "We visited my grandmother every summer."
- Use it for a single event that interrupts something else: "The phone rang", "He fell off his bike".
- The action is complete in the speaker's mind, even when it lasted a long time: "The war ended in 1945."

The past continuous: the action in progress

- Use the past continuous for an action that was happening at a past moment: "At ten, I was studying."
- Use it for the background of a story: "The rain was falling and the wind was blowing."
- Use it for two actions happening at the same time: "I was cooking while she was talking on the phone."
- The continuous does not show the beginning, the end or the number of repetitions. It shows the middle.

The interruption pattern

- Longer action: past continuous. Shorter interrupting event: past simple.
- "I was walking home when I saw Maria." The walk goes on; the seeing happens once.
- The pattern works in both orders: "When I saw Maria, I was walking home."
- With interrupt, the interrupting verb is always past simple: "She interrupted me while I was speaking."

When and while as signals

- When plus past simple introduces the event: "When the film ended, we went home."
- While plus past continuous introduces the longer background: "While the film was playing, he fell asleep."
- Both clauses can be continuous with while: "She was reading while he was cooking."
- When is also possible before a continuous clause, and as is common in writing: "As I was leaving, the phone rang."

Stative verbs and the story sequence

- Stative verbs stay in the past simple: know, want, like, need, believe, understand, own, belong.
- Say "I wanted to help", not "I was wanting to help". Say "The bag belonged to me", not "was belonging".
- For a sequence of completed events, keep every verb in the past simple: "He got up, made coffee and left."
- For two actions at the same time, use the continuous for both: "They were laughing and talking."

Questions

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

1. I ___ TV when the phone rang.

2. She ___ the door and walked in.

3. While they ___, the lights went out.

4. We ___ to Rome three times last year.

5. He ___ when I saw him.

6. The film started while we ___ popcorn.

7. I ___ my keys yesterday, but I found them later.

8. At 7 a.m. I ___ breakfast.

9. She was reading when her friend ___ .

10. They ___ football every Sunday when they were children.

11. What ___ when the accident happened?

12. When I arrived, the guests ___ .

13. He ___ off his bike while he was cycling to work.

14. I did not hear the phone because I ___ music.

15. We ___ dinner at eight, then we watched a film.

16. It was cold, so she ___ her coat.

17. While I ___ , someone stole my bag.

18. The sun ___ and the birds were singing.

19. He ___ the report all morning and finished at noon.

20. Did you ___ TV last night?

Answer key

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1. **was watching** — The TV was the longer background action, so the past continuous is right: was watching.
2. **opened** — A finished action in a sequence takes the past simple: opened, then walked.
3. **were studying** — While signals an action in progress. They takes were: were studying.
4. **went** — Three completed visits are a finished past fact, so use the past simple: went.
5. **was running** — He was in the middle of running at the moment I saw him: was running.
6. **were buying** — While marks the background action in progress: were buying. The film starting is the event.
7. **lost** — Losing the keys was a single finished event, so the past simple fits: lost.
8. **was having** — The action was in progress at a specific past moment, so use was having.
9. **called** — The call is the interrupting event, so it takes the past simple: called. Reading is the background.
10. **played** — A repeated past habit takes the past simple: played every Sunday.
11. **were you doing** — The question asks about the action in progress at the moment of the accident: were you doing.
12. **were dancing** — The dancing was already in progress when I arrived: were dancing.
13. **fell** — The fall is the single event that interrupted the cycling, so it takes the past simple: fell.
14. **was listening to** — The music was playing throughout the moment of the call, so the past continuous fits: was listening to.
15. **had** — Two finished actions in sequence take the past simple: had, then watched.
16. **put on** — Putting on the coat was one completed action, so the past simple is correct: put on.
17. **was sleeping** — The sleeping was in progress when the theft happened: was sleeping.
18. **was shining** — This is the background scene, so both verbs take the past continuous: was shining.
19. **was writing** — The writing continued through the morning, so the past continuous describes it: was writing.
20. **watch** — After did in a past simple question, use the base verb: Did you watch.