

The past continuous tense

A / Form

The past continuous tense is formed by the past tense of the verb **to be** + **the present participle**:

Affirmative	Negative	Interrogative
I was working	I was not working	was I working?
you were working	you were not working	were you working?
he/she/it was working	he/she/it was not working	was he/she/it working?
we were working	we were not working	were we working?
you were working	you were not working	were you working?
they were working	they were not working	were they working?

- **Short answers** Yes, I/ he/ she / it was. No, I/ he/ she / it wasn't.
 Yes, you/ we / they were. No, you/ we / they weren't.
- **Negative contractions:** I wasn't working, you weren't working etc.
- **Negative interrogative:** was he not/wasn't he working? etc.

B / Use

1/ To talk about an action, an event or a situation in progress (going on) in the past ; that is an action at some point between its beginning and end.

I was doing something = I was in the middle of doing something at a certain time. The action or situation had already started before this time, but had not finished.

I started doing I was doing I finished doing

now

Examples : We were having breakfast at 7.30. I didn't hear the doorbell. I was listening to music.

Note: we often use “all” to emphasize **continuity** (all day, all summer, all night, all evening, etc.); that is to show and stress that an action or event was in progress throughout this time.

It was raining all night. I was watching TV all evening.

2/ Used without a time expression, the past continuous can indicate gradual development:

It was getting darker. The wind was rising.

3/ We often use the past progressive together with the simple past tense to say that something happened in the middle of something else.

- The past continuous refers to a longer, background action or situation;
- The simple past refers to the shorter, complete action or event that happened in the middle of the longer one, or that interrupted it.

Examples : Matt phoned while we were having dinner.

 We were having a walk by the river when it started raining.

Note : Conjunctions used to introduce long actions are: **when, as, just as** and **while**. BUT the shorter actions can be introduced by “**when**”. E.g. We were having supper when the phone rang.

4/ To talk about actions in progress at the same time in the past. (both actions went on during the same period of time)

Examples : While I was reading, Ann was playing the piano.

BUT/ When one complete action followed another (when one thing happened after another), we use the past simple for both.

Examples: Tim got up when the doorbell rang.

Compare: A. When Karen arrived, we were having dinner. (we had already started before she arrived .

B. When Karen arrived, we had dinner. (Karen arrived ,and then we had dinner)

5/ past States and situations

A) For a past state we normally use the past simple.

Examples : My grandmother loved this house. I didn't know what to do.

B) With temporary states or situations we can sometimes use the past continuous.

Examples: I didn't feel/ wasn't feeling very well.

It happened while I was living in London last year.

6/ Repeated actions

The simple past is usually used for talking about repeated or habitual past actions. However, The past continuous is possible when repeated actions are temporary, only for a period , or if the repeated actions form a background for the main actions.

Examples: My car was off the road. I was travelling to work by bus that week.

At the time when it happened, I was seeing a lot of Belinda, and I was also going to the opera a lot.

7/We can use the past continuous for a past arrangement.

Example: I was in my way to the pub. I was meeting James there.
(I had arranged to meet him there)

8/ The past progressive can be used with “always, continually” and similar words to talk about things that happened repeatedly and unexpectedly, or in an unplanned way.

Examples: I didn't like him. He was always borrowing money.

When I worked here, I was always making mistakes.

Do you remember Mr. Adams? He was always quoting Shakespeare.

9/ Polite enquiries.

Example: I was wondering if you wanted to come to the cinema.
I was wondering if you could give me a lift.

10/ To talk about anticipated events (events intended to take place) that did not happen.

Examples: they were going to Wales on holiday that summer, but there was a train strike and they had to cancel their trip.

I was going to phone you, but I forgot.

I was thinking of going to Italy this year, but I haven't decided.

11/ To describe the background and set the scene for a narrative in the past.

Example: The wind was blowing and the rain was beating down. John Snell was standing at the bus stop shivering. He was trying to imagine being at home sitting by a warm fire. Finally he saw the headlights of the bus approaching from the distance.