

# PAST CONTINUOUS TENSE

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**Past tense of the verb  
to be + present participle  
of the main verb:**

**I was walking**

**I wasn't walking**

**Was I walking?**

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▶ ***1. Events in progress***

- ▶ The past continuous may refer generally to events in progress around a particular time in the past. It may highlight the temporary nature of events:
- ▶ **Where I was living in Leicester six months ago, I had a massive room. It was too big really.**
- ▶ **I was working last night.**
- ▶ **Fourteen hours later, we were entering Kingston Harbour.**
- ▶ compare: Fourteen hours later we entered Kingston Harbour.
- ▶ (The past simple emphasises the whole event, from start to finish; the past continuous emphasises the event as being in progress but unfinished at the time referred to).

▶ ***2. Background events***

- ▶ The past continuous may refer to past-time events occurring as a background to other events which interrupt them. The events which occur in the foreground are usually in the past simple:
- ▶ foreground                      background
- ▶ **She was here once, and I was baking a cake. And she said, 'Can I help you?'**
- ▶ **Two builders were working on our house when it was being built, and a ghost passed them on the stairs, and they refused to come back and finish the building. It terrified them.**

‣ ***3. The past simple on sequences of events***

- **He suffered a head wound, for which he went to hospital and received ten stitches.**
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‣ ***4. Ongoing and repeated events***

- The past continuous may refer to ongoing or repeated events in the past. There is often a suggestion that the situation was temporary or subject to change:
- **A: She only had a very small income which I gave her each week and that was coming out of my overdraft.**
- **B: I see.**
- **A: But the bank was only prepared to support me up to a point.**

‣ ***5. The past continuous may occur with adverbs such as always, constantly, to describe repeated unplanned (or undesired) events:***

- **People were always warning me that my success wouldn't last.**
- **I wasn't constantly collapsing in floods of tears, but I was in quite a bad way.**

‣ ***6. The past continuous and definite time***

- The past continuous can be used to refer to definite past time, usually to emphasise the extended nature of an event:
- **I was talking to Mark last night.**
- **We were working in the garden all day yesterday.**
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# THE PAST continuous VERSUS THE PAST SIMPLE

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- ▶ Often there is little difference between the past continuous and the past simple, except that the past continuous suggests that the events may be seen more as background or of secondary importance, or their temporary nature may be more emphasised:
- ▶ **Being an eye clinic, it was dealing with a very high proportion of elderly people. (or: Being an eye clinic, it dealt with a very high proportion ...)**
- ▶ [describing an archaeological dig]:
- ▶ **And scattered throughout a lot of the area he dug, he found iron slag, so, you know, they were making quite a lot of stuff. Phase one, under the bank he found some crucibles and crucibles were used in bronze working. In the earlier phase at least they were making bronze implements as well. (or: ... so, you know, they made quite a lot of stuff. ... In the earlier phase at least they made bronze implements as well.)**

# Verbs not normally used in the past continuous

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- ▶ a. Verbs which rarely occur in the present continuous are similarly rarely used in the past continuous, and the past simple is generally preferred. These include:
  - ▶ **Believe, consist, contain, dislike, hate, have to, know, like, mean \*, smell \*, taste \*, think \*, understand, want \*.**
  - ▶ Breakfast consisted of a mug of tea and a piece of fruit pudding each.
  - ▶ **You didn't have to explain it to me. I knew what you meant.** (NOT: You weren't having to explain it to me. I was knowing what you were meaning.)
  - ▶ The room still smelt of smoke from the last occupant's cigarettes.
- ▶ b. However, as with the present tense usage, the past continuous may occasionally be used to emphasise an ongoing or unfolding process in the past, though this happens much less frequently than in the present tense:
  - ▶ We had a pleasant ride back. I was liking James more and more and he was very attentive to me, showing very clearly how much he enjoyed my visits to his home.
  - ▶ Emma had been worrying for some time that she was going to crash her meagre budget with all the minicabs and taxis she was having to use.