

Grammar Reference

Past perfect continuous

Meaning and use

We use the past perfect continuous to describe an action or situation that was happening over a period of time up to another past event or point in time. It is often used to **give background information**.

*I **had been living** in London for two years when I met Alice.
I'd been waiting for two hours **before** the bus arrived.*

We often use it with the past simple. The past perfect continuous is always used for the action that happened or started happening earlier.

*He had a headache because **he had been listening** to loud music.
Silvia **had been sleeping** for three hours when her mother woke her up.*

However, the events in the sentence do not have to appear in the order they happened. The earlier event can come second.

*Before I met Alice, I **had been living** in London for two years. (the earlier event appears **later** in the sentence)
I **had been living** in London for two years before I met Alice. (the earlier event appears **first** in the sentence)*

The past perfect continuous can be used with a **relative clause**:

*Jack ran the marathon in 2014, **for which he had been training** since 2010.*

...or with a **time conjunction**:

***After** I had been swimming for an hour, I was so cold I had to stop.*

The past perfect continuous can also be used to **give reasons**:

*I was exhausted when I got home **because I had been training** the whole morning.*

Take note: past perfect continuous versus past perfect simple

For activities that continue for a long time (*work, run, sleep...*), we can often use the simple or continuous forms of the past perfect.

*Patrick felt refreshed because **he had slept** all afternoon.
Patrick felt refreshed because **he had been sleeping** all day.*

If the earlier action has been completed, then we use the past perfect.

*I'd already **cooked** supper when Jan got home.*

If the earlier action is incomplete, then we use the past perfect continuous. This focuses on the process or how long the action continued, rather than the end result.

*The children **had been playing** in the park for hours when they suddenly realised that it was dark.*

We use the past perfect simple if we say how many times something happened up to a particular time in the past.

***He had read** the book three times.
He had cycled two kilometres before he realised he had a puncture.*

Form

The past perfect continuous is made with:

subject + had/hadn't + been + -ing form of verb

Positive

*John went to the doctor because **he'd been having** trouble sleeping.*

Negative

***We hadn't been waiting** long when the taxi arrived.*

Question

Present perfect continuous questions are made with:

Had (not) + subject + been + -ing form of verb

***Had you been drinking** when you fell off your bike?*

Take note: Pronouncing the past perfect continuous

In informal writing and in speech, we often use a contraction with the auxiliary verb in the past perfect continuous:

*They'd **been** watching television for two hours when their parents returned.*

*I felt dizzy because I **hadn't** been drinking enough water during the race..*

When you listen to someone using the negative form **hadn't**, listen carefully. It is sometimes difficult to hear the difference between **had** and **hadn't**, but it makes a big difference in meaning!