

The Past Continuous Tense

Introduction

1) We use the past continuous when we describe a situation, or several situations in progress, happening at the same time in the past. This is often contrasted with a sudden event in the past simple.

[I was working on my computer and my brother was reading a book]¹ [when we heard a loud bang on the door]². 1 – background situation, 2 – sudden event

2) The past continuous is formed with *the past form of the auxiliary verb to be* and the *-ing form of the main verb*. Questions are formed by inverting the subject and the auxiliary verb *to be*. Negatives are formed with the auxiliary verb *to be* + *not*. This is contracted in speech and informal writing.

(+) Jim was playing video games all night.

(-) Jim was not playing video games all night./He wasn't playing video games all night.

(?) Was Jim playing video games all night? Why was he playing video games all night?

Some **time markers** can emphasize the duration of the action or state when the action was taking place. These **time markers** are *at 7 o'clock, for two hours, in January, last week, all night etc.*

*Kate was trying to find a nice apartment in her area **for 5 months**.*

We can use *when* or *while* with the past continuous to mean 'during the time that'.

***While** they were waiting for the train, it started to rain.*

*James broke his finger **when** he was playing basketball.*

Remember that **non-continuous verbs (e.g. to love, hate, know, want etc.)** are not used in any continuous tenses. Use the past simple instead.

~~*I was having fun at the party, but Kim was wanting to go home.*~~ *I was having fun at the party, but Kim wanted to go home.*

Short Story Dialogue

The past continuous is widely used in daily life.

– *Nate, where were you yesterday? **I was trying to reach you the whole evening.***

– *Sorry, Sam, it was such a crazy day!*

– *Why so?*

– *Well, my college project was due so **I was running all over the city collecting information.** I needed to write an article so **I was meeting up with people, I was even interviewing to strangers in the streets.***

– *That sounds like a stressful day!*

– *You bet! **While I was interviewing one old lady, a cop came up to me and wanted to see my ID.** But that's OK.*

– *Did you finish your project at least?*

– *Thankfully, yes. **I was working on it the whole day!***

Independent Practice - Past continuous tense

1) Underline the correct phrase.

a. Last summer I <i>was swimming/swam</i> in the river every day.
b. While I took/ <i>was taking a shower</i> , the phone <i>rang/ringed</i> .
c. Ann <i>was breaking/broke</i> a cup when she <i>washed/was washing</i> the dishes.

2) Complete each sentence with a suitable time marker.

<i>at</i>	<i>while</i>	<i>when</i>	<i>in</i>
a. Sally was working on her thesis 8 o'clock.			
b. Tom was sleeping peacefully in his bed his mom took a picture of him.			
c. I was living in Italy 2009.			
d. A burglar broke into their house they were watching TV.			

3) Answer the questions.

a. What were you doing at 5 p.m. last night?
b. What were you doing when you heard a phone call?
c. What was your family doing when you went on a vacation together?

Independent Practice: Answers - Past continuous tense

1) Underline the correct phrase.

- a. Last summer I was swimming/swam in the river every day.
- b. While I washed/was washing my hair, the phone rang/ringed.
- c. Ann was breaking/broke a cup when she washed/was washing the dishes.

2) Complete each sentence with a suitable time marker.

- a. Sally was working on her thesis **at** 8 o'clock.
- b. Tom was sleeping peacefully in his bed **when** his mom took a picture of him.
- c. I was living in Italy **in** 2009.
- d. A burglar broke into their house **while** they were watching TV.

3) Answer the questions. Sample Answers:

- a. I was watching a movie with my friends.
- b. I was having a bath when I heard a phone call.
- c. My family was spending time at the beach when we went on a vacation together.