**The Past Continuous Tense**

We use the past continuous to talk about:

1. **Description of conditions that existed in the past:**

* The sun **was shining** every day that summer

1. **Interrupted Action in the Past**

Something that was happening continuously in the past when another action interrupted it

The past continuous is used to indicate that a longer action in the past was interrupted. The interruption is usually a shorter action in the simple past.

* We **were making** dinner when she arrived.
* I **was watching** TV when she called.
* What **were** you **doing** when the earthquake started?

1. **Something was happening at a precise time in the past (Specific Time as an Interruption)**

In USE 2, described above, the past continuous is interrupted by a shorter action in the simple past. However, you can also use a specific time as an interruption.

An action was in progress at a precise moment in the past.

* Last night at 6 PM, I **was eating** dinner.
* At midnight, we **were** still **driving** through the desert.
* Yesterday at this time, I **was sitting** at my desk at work.

**N.B.** In the simple past, a specific time is used to show when an action began or finished. In the past continuous, a specific time only interrupts the action.

Examples:

* Last night at 6 PM, I **ate** dinner.  
  *I started eating at 6 PM.*
* Last night at 6 PM, I **was eating** dinner.  
  *I started earlier; and at 6 PM, I was in the process of eating dinner.*

1. **Parallel Actions**

When you use the past continuous with two actions in the same sentence, it expresses the idea that both actions were happening at the same time. The actions are parallel.

* I **was studying** while he **was making** dinner.
* While Ellen **was reading**, Tim **was watching** television.
* **Were** you **listening** while he **was talking**?
* I **wasn't paying** attention while I **was writing** the letter, so I made several mistakes.

1. **Repetition and Irritation with "Always"**

The past continuous with words such as "always" or "constantly" expresses the idea that something irritating or shocking often happened in the past. The concept is very similar to the expression “[*used to*](https://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/usedto.html)” but with negative emotion. Remember to put the words "always" or "constantly" between "be" and "verb+ing."

* She **was always coming** to class late.
* He **was constantly talking**. He annoyed everyone.
* I didn't like them because they **were always complaining**.

1. **Descriptions**

We use the continuous tense in descriptions.

* Ex: A wood fire **was burning** on the hearth, and a cat **was sleeping** in front of it. A girl **was playing** the piano and (was) singing softly to herself. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. The girl stopped playing. The cat woke up. (a combination of description (past continuous) with narrative (simple past)).

1. **While vs. When**

Clauses are groups of words which have meaning, but are often not complete sentences. Some clauses begin with the word "when" such as "when she called" or "when it hit me." Other clauses begin with "while" such as "while she was sleeping" and "while he was surfing." When you talk about things in the past, "when" is most often followed by the verb tense [*simple past*](https://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/simplepast.html), whereas "while" is usually followed by past continuous. "While" expresses the idea of "during that time." Study the examples below. They have similar meanings, but they emphasize different parts of the sentence.

* I was studying **when she called**.
* **While I was studying**, she called.

1. **Atmosphere**

In English, we often use a series of parallel actions to describe the atmosphere at a particular time in the past.

* When I walked into the office, several people **were** busily **typing**, some **were talking** on the phones, the boss **was yelling** directions, and customers **were waiting** to be helped. One customer **was yelling** at a secretary and **waving** his hands. Others **were complaining** to each other about the bad service.

1. **to express a change of mind**:

* I **was going** to spend the day at the beach but I've decided to go on a trip instead.

1. **with 'wonder', to make a very polite request:**

* I **was wondering** if you could baby-sit for me tonight.

**Form: SUBJECT + (Was / were) + VERB-ing.**

* The verbs in the past continuous are formed by adding (were/ was) after the subject, then add the verb with –**Ing**. E.g.: driving (drive), sleeping (sleep).
* When forming the negative form, just add **“Not”:** they **were not** (weren't) watching a film
* To make a **'yes / no' question**, put “was / were” before of the subject: **Were** you working?
* To make a **“wh” question,** put the question word at the beginning (what, why, where, who, when): **Why were** you working?
* Stative verbs are not suitable to be used with the past continuous, e.g.: The verb **know**. We do not say: she was knowing X, instead we just say: she knew**√**.

**Signal words: *While, As…***