

FREE RESOURCE · GRAMMAR

Past simple vs past continuous

Use the past simple for finished events, states and habits in the past (I had a car; I walked to school). Use the past continuous (was or were + -ing) for an action in progress at a past moment, usually as background to a shorter event: I was walking home when it started to rain.

What to know

The two forms in one picture

Imagine a story as a film. The **past continuous** is the background: what was happening, like a long scene. The **past simple** is the event that happens in front of it: the short action that moves the story forward.

- *I was reading in the library when the fire alarm went off.* · background + event
- *She opened the window and looked outside.* · two finished events, one after the other

How to form each tense

The **past simple** adds -ed to regular verbs (studied, worked) or uses an irregular form (went, had, knew). Questions and negatives use did + base verb: Did you travel? I did not travel.

Background action and interrupting event

Use the continuous for the longer action and the simple for the shorter one that interrupts it. The words **while** and **as** usually go with the continuous: While I was waiting, the bus broke down. The word **when** often goes with the simple event: I was waiting when the bus broke down.

State verbs: had, knew, wanted, not was having

Some verbs describe a state, not an action: have (own), know, want, like, love, hate, need, believe, understand, belong, seem. These almost never take the continuous, even for the past. Say **I had a bike**, not I was having a bike. Say **I knew the answer**, not I was knowing it.

Past habits

For things you did again and again in the past, use the past simple with a time word, or **used to**: I walked to school every day. As a child I used to play outside. Do not use the past continuous for a habit. I was walking to school every day is wrong for a normal routine.

Exercises

1. At primary school, I _____ a very strict teacher.
 - a. was having
 - b. had
 - c. have had
2. At eight o'clock last night, I _____ my essay, and I had not finished it yet.
 - a. was writing
 - b. wrote

3. She _____ the answer, so she kept quiet.
- a. didn't knowing
 - b. didn't know
 - c. wasn't knowing
4. As a teenager, I _____ to school every day.
- a. walked
 - b. was walk
 - c. was walking
5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) Last year (2) I was wanting (3) a better job, (4) so I applied.
6. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) He didn't (2) answer the (3) question because (4) he was not understanding it.
7. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): was / called. / I / when / studying / friend / were / my
8. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): left / the / we / library. / was / raining / were / It / when
9. Correct this: *I was knowing the answer, but I forgot the word.*
10. Correct this: *I was having a car when I was a student.*

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/past-simple-vs-past-continuous/practice/

IELTS tip. In Speaking Part 2, start with the past simple to say what happened, then add one or two sentences in the past continuous for the scene: It was raining and people were hurrying home. This gives your story both pace and detail. Check that every state verb, such as had, knew and wanted, stays simple.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Past simple vs past continuous

AIM	Learners use the past continuous for background and the past simple for events, states and habits, and avoid continuous forms with state verbs.
TIME	30 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Show a short frozen scene (a picture of a busy street with a child dropping an ice cream). Ask: What was happening? What happened? Elicit sentences with both forms.

Lesson steps

1. Draw a timeline with a long wavy line for the background and a short cross for the event. Label with the tense names.
2. Learners complete ten sentence halves, matching the background with the event (I was cooking when..., While we were walking...).
3. Teach state verbs with a quick sort: action verbs on one side, state verbs on the other. Elicit that the state side does not take the continuous.
4. Pairs tell each other a true story from last weekend, using at least two pairs of continuous plus simple. The partner notes the verbs.
5. Introduce past habits and used to, then check with a gap-fill using a mix of all three forms.

Extension

Learners record a Part 2 story and mark each verb as event, background, state or habit on their transcript.

Answer key

1. b) had. Having a teacher is a state, not an action in progress, so use the past simple: had.
2. a) was writing. An action in progress at a stated moment uses the past continuous.
3. b) didn't know. Know is a state verb, so use the past simple: didn't know.
4. a) walked. A habit in the past uses the past simple. The continuous would suggest one moment.
5. Part 2: *I was wanting* → **wanted**. Want is a state verb, so use the past simple: wanted.
6. Part 4: *he was not understanding it.* → **did not understand**. Understand is a state verb: use did not understand.
7. I was studying when my friend called. The long action (was studying) comes first, then when and the short event (called).

8. It was raining when we left the library. The background action is in the past continuous, and the event that happens during it is in the past simple.
9. I knew the answer, but I forgot the word. Know is a state verb. Use the past simple: knew.
10. I had a car when I was a student. Have meaning own is a state verb. Use the past simple: had.

Questions learners often ask

What is the difference between past simple and past continuous? The past simple names a finished event, state or habit. The past continuous shows an action that was in progress at a certain time in the past, often as the background to an event.

Can I say I was having a car? No. When have means own, it is a state verb and takes the past simple: I had a car. You can use the continuous when have means eat or experience: I was having breakfast.

Do I use while or when with the past continuous? While and as usually go with the longer continuous action: While I was working, the phone rang. When often goes with the shorter event in the past simple.

How do I talk about past habits? Use the past simple with a time word (I played football every weekend) or used to. Do not use the past continuous for a normal repeated routine.

Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage, 4th edition. Oxford University Press.
- Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (2006). Cambridge Grammar of English. Cambridge University Press.

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