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The **Past Continuous** (or progressive) is a verb tense that indicates actions or events that were *in progress* at a particular time *in the past*. The word 'continuous' (or 'progressive') shows that the action was continuing or in progress.

We generally use the Past Continuous to talk about actions and states in progress (happening) *around a particular time in the past*. It can emphasize that the action or state continued for a period of time in the past.

Here's an illustration of what Past Continuous means:



via <https://www.learnathome.ru/grammar/past-continuous-tense.html>

- Jane **was reading** a book when I came in.
- This time last week I **was hiking** in the Alps.
- Did they have time to see the sights of Rome?
- Not really. They **were playing** football all weekend.

How to form Past Continuous

To make the **Past Continuous**, use:

was/were + the '-ing' form of the verb ([Present Participle](#))

Note: To form the Present Participle we add **'-ing'** to the base form of the verb. For spelling rules when adding **'-ing'**, see our article on [participles](#).

Singular

Plural

*I **was walking***

*We **were walking***

*You **were walking***

*You **were walking***

*He/she/it **was walking***

*They **were walking***

- *I **was listening** to my iPod, so I didn't hear the fire alarm.*
- *Last night at 6 PM, I **was eating** dinner.*

When to use Past Continuous

The Past Continuous is used to convey the following meanings.

Actions in progress at a time in the past

Past Continuous is used to show something was happening at some point in the past. This point may be expressed as a certain time or another action in the past. Words that often signal this tense: *while, during*.

- *I **was living** in Singapore during the 1990s.*
- *We **were trying** to fix the computer earlier.*

Interrupted actions in the past

Past Continuous is often used to describe what was going on *when a particular event happened* or to give the *reason* for a past event. That continuing action in the past is usually interrupted by a shorter action in the [Past Simple](#):

- *We **were eating** lunch when somebody knocked on the door.*
- *The last time I saw him, he **was washing** his car.*
- *She didn't go out because she **was working** late.*
- *I forgot about my meal because I **was talking** on the phone.*

Parallel actions

If we use Past Continuous with two actions in the same sentence, it means that both actions were happening *at the same time*. Words that often signal this tense: *while, as*.

- *I **was lying** on the bed while I **was reading**.*
- *We **were ordering** food and you **were interrupting**.*

Background

We often use the Past Continuous to describe the *background* of a story. For example, we can talk about the weather or what people were doing before the story (event, action) started:

- *It was a beautiful day. The sun **was shining** and the birds **were singing**. Children **were laughing** and **playing** in the street. Suddenly a heavy grey cloud appeared in the sky.*

Irritating or annoying habits

We can use Past Continuous to describe *irritating* or *annoying habits* that were happening in the past. We usually use 'always,' 'constantly,' 'continuously,' 'continually' in these sentences.

- *She **was always coming** to class late.*
- *He **was constantly talking**. He annoyed everyone.*

Polite questions

It means using a particular tone when inquiring. This is typical for formal situations.

- *I **was hoping** you would tell me.*
- *I **was wondering** if you know how to get there.*

Non-continuous verbs

It is important to remember that [non-continuous verbs](#) cannot be used in any continuous tenses. Instead of using Past Continuous, we must use [Past Simple](#).

- *Kate **was** at my house when he arrived.*
- NOT: *Kate ~~**was being**~~ at my house when he arrived.*

Watch this video from AMES836 to understand what Past Continuous means and how it is used:

More on Past Continuous:

[Past Continuous: Negative & Questions](#)

[Past Continuous Passive](#)