

NL

The Night the Lights Went Out

A city in darkness, a community brought together, and four narrative tenses

B2

Reading

Grammar

40 min

★ Lesson Objectives

- ★ Read a narrative article about a major city blackout
- ★ Learn vocabulary related to emergencies and community
- ★ Master narrative tenses: past simple, continuous, perfect, perfect continuous
- ★ Understand when and why each tense is used in storytelling
- ★ Discuss emergency situations and community resilience
- ★ Write a personal narrative using all four tenses

1 Before You Read

- ▶ Have you ever experienced a power cut? What happened?
- ▶ Imagine 48 hours without electricity. What's the biggest challenge?
- ▶ Are modern cities too dependent on electricity?

2 Reading: When Rotterdam Went Dark

At 7:42 pm on a cold Friday, every light in Rotterdam went out. In one silent second, a city of 650,000 was plunged into total darkness.

The blackout lasted 47 hours. An ageing transformer that had been showing deterioration for months finally gave out. The failure triggered a cascade that knocked out three backup systems. Within four minutes the grid had collapsed.

Paramedic Eva Kuiper was driving through the centre when lights went out. Cars had pulled over. People were standing on pavements looking at the sky — stars incredibly bright. But her radio had gone silent, GPS had died, and she had been heading to an emergency she now couldn't find.

Hospitals switched to generators, but two clinics that had not tested theirs discovered they didn't work. Refrigerated containers lost power; food began to spoil. Commuters who had been travelling home found themselves stranded underground.

Restaurant owner Malik El-Haddad had been preparing for a busy evening. He had already cooked for 80 guests. He carried tables outside, lit candles, and served free meals. "People had been walking in the dark. Strangers were sitting together, sharing food, talking to neighbours they had never spoken to."

Retired teacher Johanna Vos had been living alone for three years. "I had not spoken to my neighbour in two years. Saturday she knocked with a flask of coffee. We sat together all day. I had forgotten what that felt like."

By Sunday, power had been restored. Life resumed. But something had shifted. Volunteers formed a neighbourhood network. Malik started free monthly dinners. Johanna began visiting her neighbour daily. "We had been living next to each other without seeing each other. It took 47 hours of darkness to make us visible again."

3 Vocabulary

Word	Definition	Example
granted	accepted as normal	<i>Take electricity for granted.</i>
catastrophic	causing sudden great damage	<i>Catastrophic failure.</i>
substation	power distribution facility	<i>The substation failed.</i>
deterioration	becoming gradually worse	<i>Signs of deterioration.</i>
cascade	series of linked failures	<i>Triggered a cascade.</i>
paramedic	emergency medical worker	<i>Eva is a paramedic.</i>
stranded	left with no way to leave	<i>Stranded underground.</i>
perishable	food that goes bad quickly	<i>Perishable ingredients.</i>
spoil	become unfit to eat	<i>Food began to spoil.</i>
torchlight	light from a torch	<i>Evacuated by torchlight.</i>
flask	container for hot drinks	<i>Flask of coffee.</i>
stockpiled	stored a large amount	<i>Stockpiled fresh produce.</i>
resumed	started again after pause	<i>Routines resumed.</i>
shifted	changed noticeably	<i>Something had shifted.</i>
neighbourhood	area around where you live	<i>Neighbourhood network.</i>
visible	able to be seen/noticed	<i>Made us visible again.</i>

Collocations: power cut • backup generator • ground to a halt • take for granted • go to waste • knock out • pull over • give up

4 Grammar: Narrative Tenses

■ In the Text, You Saw...

- Past simple (main events): "Every light went out."
- Past continuous (background): "Eva was driving when the lights went out."
- Past perfect (earlier event): "The transformer had been showing signs for months."
- Past perfect cont. (duration before): "Malik had been preparing for a busy evening."

Tense	Form	Role	Example
Past Simple	V2	Main events	She opened the door.
Past Cont.	was/were + -ing	Background/scene	It was raining when...
Past Perfect	had + pp	Earlier event	She had left before I arrived.
Past Perf. Cont.	had been + -ing	Duration before event	I had been waiting an hour.

★ Storytelling Formula

1. Set scene (past continuous): 'It was a cold night...'
2. Main events (past simple): 'Suddenly, the lights went out.'
3. Add depth (past perfect): 'Nobody had expected this.'
4. Show duration (past perf. cont.): 'The transformer had been deteriorating for months.'

▲ Common Mistakes

- X "I was walking and was seeing a fox." → ✓ "...and saw..." (sudden = simple)
- X "When I arrived, she left." → ✓ "...she had already left." (earlier = perfect)
- X "He cooked for 2h when power cut." → ✓ "had been cooking..." (duration = perf. cont.)

5 Game: Choose the Narrative Tense

1. Eva ___ her ambulance when lights went out. (background) → was driving (past continuous)
2. Transformer ___ deterioration for months. (duration before) → had been showing (past perf. cont.)
3. Malik ___ food for 80 guests before the cut. (earlier completed) → had already cooked (past perfect)
4. Every light ___. (main event) → went out (past simple)
5. People ___ on the pavement. (scene) → were standing (past continuous)
6. She ___ her neighbour in 2 years. (earlier timeframe) → hadn't spoken to (past perfect)
7. By Sunday, power ___. (completed before) → had been restored (past perfect)
8. Commuters ___ home on the metro. (in progress) → were travelling (past continuous)
9. Johanna ___ alone for 3 years. (duration before) → had been living (past perf. cont.)
10. Something ___ in the community. (completed change) → had shifted (past perfect)

6 Comprehension Quiz

1. How long did the blackout last?

Answer: 47 hours

2. What caused it?

Answer: Catastrophic transformer failure at the substation

3. What did Malik do with his food?

Answer: Served free meals to strangers

4. What did Johanna say?

Answer: It took darkness to make people visible again

5. 'She ___ home when lights went out.' Tense?

Answer: was walking (past continuous)

6. 'He ___ for 2 hours before the cut.' Tense?

Answer: had been cooking (past perf. continuous)

7. 'By Sunday, power ___ .' Tense?

Answer: had been restored (past perfect)

8. Past perfect continuous shows:

Answer: Duration before a key event

7 Fill in the Blanks

1. It ___ heavily when the accident happened.

2. She ___ for the bus for 30 min when it arrived.

3. He ___ his keys, so he couldn't get in.

4. I ___ the door and ___ inside.

5. They ___ dinner when the doorbell ___ .

6. By the time we arrived, the show ___ .

7. She ___ all day, so she was exhausted.

8. Children ___ in the garden when it ___ to rain.

● Answers: 1. was raining • 2. had been waiting • 3. had lost • 4. opened ... walked • 5. were having ... rang • 6. had already started • 7. had been working • 8. were playing ... began

8 Speaking & Writing

◆ Discussion Questions

1. What would you do if your city lost power for 48 hours?
2. Malik turned a crisis into community. Seen something good from bad?
3. What did Johanna mean by 'the darkness made us visible'?
4. Tell a partner a memorable experience using all 4 tenses.
5. Are we too dependent on technology?

◆ Example Dialogue

A: I was studying when the lights went out. I had been working for 3 hours.

B: What did you do?

A: I found candles. My flatmate had already gone to bed.

B: I hadn't realised how noisy my flat normally was until everything went silent.

◆ Writing Task

Write 100–150 words about a memorable or dramatic event:

- Past continuous to set the scene
- Past simple for main events
- Past perfect for earlier actions/flashbacks
- Past perfect continuous for duration before the event

Use all four narrative tenses at least once.

9 Review Checklist

I can now...

- ✓ understand a long narrative article about a city blackout
- ✓ use vocabulary related to emergencies and community life
- ✓ use past simple for main events in a story
- ✓ use past continuous for background and scene-setting
- ✓ use past perfect for events before the main story
- ✓ use past perfect continuous for duration before a key event



Congratulations!

You have completed Lesson 20: The Night the Lights Went Out.