

GRAMMAR · LESSON 02 · B1

Where Were You *When* ...?

Past Simple vs Past Continuous — the storytelling tenses

Some days stay with us forever. Maybe it was a storm, a phone call, or a knock on the door. This lesson teaches you to tell that story — using the two past tenses English reserves for exactly this kind of memory.

50 min

2 past tenses

CEFR B1

Ages 11-16

What you'll learn

- Tell when to use Past Simple (events) vs Past Continuous (scenes).
- Use the interruption pattern with **when**, **while**, and **as**.
- Write an 80–100 word personal story combining both tenses.

1

WARM-UP · 4 MIN

Quick questions before we start

Read these four questions. Each asks about a specific moment in the past. Notice the **two different verb forms** — that's today's topic.

- | | |
|----|---|
| Q1 | What were you doing <i>at eight o'clock yesterday evening</i> ? |
| Q2 | What did you have for breakfast <i>this morning</i> ? |
| Q3 | Was it raining when you woke up today? |
| Q4 | What happened the last time the power went out in your house? |

2

GRAMMAR FOCUS · 15 MIN

Two tenses, two jobs — but in the past

Both tenses describe the past. **Past Simple** reports completed events and sequences. **Past Continuous** sets the scene and shows what was already in progress.

PAST SIMPLE

PAST CONTINUOUS

The event

Form: subject + verb-ed / irregular form

- Completed actions at a specific past time
- Sequences of events
- Past states & repeated past habits
- Facts about the past

*I **opened** the door and **saw** my cat.*

The scene

Form: subject + was/were + verb-ing

- In progress at a specific past moment
- Background & atmosphere in stories
- Two simultaneous past actions
- Interrupted by another action

*At 8 p.m., I **was reading** a book.*

□ Compare: same evening, two angles

Simple	I had dinner at 8.	→ I started and finished
Continuo us	At 8, I was having dinner.	→ in the middle of it
Simple	When she called, I answered .	→ I answered after her call
Continuo us	When she called, I was answering another call.	→ I was already busy

Time expressions that signal each tense

PAST SIMPLE

yesterday, last night / week / year, two days ago, in 2018, when I was young, then, after that, finally

PAST CONTINUOUS

while, as, at 8 o'clock yesterday, all morning / day, the whole afternoon, at that moment

3

THE BIG B1 PATTERN · 5 MIN

One action interrupts the other

A **longer background action** was happening — and a **shorter event** suddenly happened and interrupted it.

BACKGROUND
D

I was reading on the sofa...

EVENT

...when the doorbell rang.

The long action (Past Continuous) was interrupted by the short event (Past Simple).

Three little connectors that signal which tense goes where:

WHEN + PAST SIMPLE EVENT	WHILE + PAST CONTINUOUS	AS + PAST CONTINUOUS
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→ "**When** the bell rang, I was reading." · "**While** I was reading, the bell rang." · "**As** I was walking home, I saw her."

⚠ **Don't forget — stative verbs stay simple in the past too**

Verbs like **know, understand, love, hate, want, believe, have (possess), see (perceive)** normally don't take the -ing form, even in the past.

~~I was knowing the answer.~~ **I knew the answer.**

~~She was having a new bike.~~ **She had a new bike.**

4

PAST SIMPLE FORMS · 4 MIN

Irregular verbs for storytelling

Regular verbs add -ed: *walk* → *walked*, *study* → *studied*, *stop* → *stopped*. **Irregular verbs** just change. Twelve common ones for storytelling:

go → went <i>travel</i>	see → saw <i>perceive</i>	have → had <i>possess / eat</i>	do → did <i>do / make</i>
come → came <i>arrive</i>	take → took <i>take / travel</i>	get → got <i>receive / become</i>	make → made <i>create</i>
know → knew <i>know (stative)</i>	think → thought <i>think (stative)</i>	feel → felt <i>feel</i>	run → ran <i>move fast</i>

Questions & negatives: use **did / didn't** + *base form*. **Did you see her?** **I didn't know.**

5

KEY VOCABULARY · 6 MIN

Words for telling a story

Word	POS	Meaning	Example
suddenly	<i>adv</i>	in a quick and unexpected way	<i>Suddenly, the lights went out.</i>
realise	<i>v</i>	to become aware of something	<i>I realised I'd left my phone at home.</i>
memorable	<i>adj</i>	worth remembering, special	<i>It was the most memorable day of the year.</i>
spot	<i>v</i>	to notice or see something quickly	<i>I spotted a tiny kitten in the garden.</i>
silence	<i>n</i>	complete absence of sound	<i>There was a long silence after the question.</i>

Word	POS	Meaning	Example
freeze	<i>v</i>	to stop moving suddenly	<i>I froze when I saw the spider.</i>
whisper	<i>v</i>	to speak very quietly	<i>She whispered the answer in my ear.</i>
unforgettable	<i>adj</i>	impossible to forget	<i>That summer was unforgettable.</i>
ordinary	<i>adj</i>	normal, not special	<i>It started as an ordinary Tuesday.</i>
incident	<i>n</i>	an event, often unusual	<i>There was a strange incident at school.</i>

6

READING · 10 MIN

Where Were You When...? — a magazine feature

Where Were You
*When...?*THE PULSE · ISSUE 05
TEEN MOMENTS

Some days stay with us forever. Maybe nothing important happened — maybe the whole world changed in ten seconds. We asked five teens about the one moment they will never forget.

M

Meera, 14

Mumbai · India

The tea stall

I **was walking** home from school last Tuesday, **thinking** about nothing in particular. It **was** quite warm, and I **was carrying** my heavy school bag. Suddenly, the sky **turned** dark grey. The rain **came** down like a waterfall. I **ran** under a little tea stall, and six strangers **ran** under it too. While the rain **was pouring**, the owner **made** chai for everyone. We **stood** there for almost an hour, laughing and talking. I *didn't know* their names. I still *remember* that afternoon more than any holiday.

K

Kai, 15

Helsinki · Finland

The green sky

Last winter, I **was walking** home from my friend Aleksii's house at about nine o'clock. It **was snowing** softly and everything **was** silent. I **was texting** my brother when I **felt** a strange light on my face. I **looked** up — and the whole sky **was glowing** green. I **froze**. I *had seen* photos of the northern lights on the internet, but I *didn't realise* they looked like that in real life. I **called** my mum and **stood** there for forty minutes. I *couldn't* move.

S

Sofia, 13

Rome · Italy

The scratch at the door

My cat Milo **disappeared** for three days last spring. I **was** heartbroken. On the third evening, I **was sitting** on my bed, **pretending** to read a book. My parents **were talking** quietly in the kitchen. Then I **heard** something — a tiny scratch at the door. I *didn't want* to get my hopes up, so I **walked** slowly. When I **opened** the door, Milo **was sitting** there, completely calm. He **looked** at me as if to say, "What's the problem?" I **cried** for twenty minutes.

D

Diego, 16

Lima · Peru

The signing

I **was browsing** in a bookshop downtown last summer. Upstairs, a modern writer I really *love* **was signing** copies of her new novel — but I *didn't know* that. While I **was reading** the back cover of one of her books, I **heard** a familiar voice behind me, asking the staff for coffee. I **turned** around slowly — it **was** her! My hands **were shaking**. I **bought** the book, and she **wrote** my name inside. I **told** her my Spanish teacher *loved* her work. She **smiled** and **said**, "Tell her from me: keep going."

A

Amina, 12

Cairo · Egypt

The blackout

Our family **was having** dinner on the balcony last August. My grandma **was telling** one of her long stories about her childhood. We **were all listening** — my brothers **weren't fighting**, even. Suddenly, the lights **went** out. The whole street **went** dark. My mother **found** some old candles, and we **stayed** on the balcony for three more hours. Grandma **told** six more stories. We *didn't check* our phones once. I still *think* it **was** the best evening of the summer.

Past Simple
(events)**Past Continuous**
(scene)*Stative verb* (no -ing)

7

PRACTICE · 8 MIN

Which tense? — 8 quick decisions

Choose the correct form (A, B or C) for each gap. Answers on the last page.

1	When I arrived at the party, everyone ___ and the music was loud. · A) was dancing B) danced C) were dancing
2	While I ___ dinner, the phone suddenly rang. · A) cooked B) was cooking C) cook
3	He didn't see the car because he ___ at his phone. · A) looked B) was looking C) looks
4	Last summer, we ___ to Spain for two weeks. · A) were travelling B) travelled C) was travelling
5	The sun ___ and the birds were singing when we woke up. · A) was shining B) shone C) shines
6	What ___ at 8 p.m. last night? I called three times! · A) did you do B) were you doing C) are you doing
7	I ___ the answer, so I kept quiet. · A) didn't know B) wasn't knowing C) didn't knew
8	She ___ when we arrived, so we made her a cup of tea. · A) was sleeping B) slept C) sleeps

8

SPEAKING · 5 MIN

Tell your partner

Work with a partner. For each question, give a full answer using **Past Continuous** (the scene) and **Past Simple** (what happened). Try to use *when*, *while*, and *as*.

Q 1 | Where were you and what were you doing when you heard about something important on the news?

Q 2 | What were you doing the last time it rained really heavily? Did anything funny happen?

Q 3 | Tell me about a time you were late. What were you doing while you should have been leaving?

Q 4 | Describe a moment you felt really proud. What was happening around you?

Q 5 | What were you doing when you met your best friend for the first time?

Model dialogue

Em ma: Tell me about a time you were late, Hugo.

Hug o: Well, last Friday I *was getting ready* for school when I *realised* I *didn't have* my maths book. I *was looking* for it everywhere while my mum *was shouting* from downstairs. In the end, I *missed* the bus.

Em ma: Oh no! Did you find the book?

Hug o: Yes — it *was sitting* under my cat. She *was sleeping* on it the whole time.

9

WRITING · 10 MIN

Write your own "moment"

Tell the story of a day or moment you will always remember (**80 to 100 words**). Set the scene with **Past Continuous**, then describe the key **Past Simple** event that made it memorable. Finish with how it felt.

Include at least: 3 Past Continuous verbs 3 Past Simple verbs 1 connector (when / while / as)

Word count: _____ / 80-100

10

COMPREHENSION QUIZ · 6 MIN

10 questions — let's see what stuck

Circle the best option (A, B, C or D) for each question.

1	At ten o'clock last night, I ___ in bed, almost asleep. · A) slept B) was sleeping C) was sleep D) sleeping
2	Yesterday morning, I ___ up late and missed the bus. · A) was waking B) woke C) waking D) woken
3	They ___ TV when the doorbell suddenly rang. · A) watched B) were watching C) watching D) did watch
4	It ___ heavily all day, so we decided to stay indoors. · A) rained B) was raining C) were raining D) rains
5	He didn't answer because he ___ a shower at that exact moment. · A) had B) was having C) has D) were having
6	While my parents ___ dinner, I was finishing my homework. · A) were cooking B) cooked C) was cooking D) are cooking
7	I ___ what she said, so I asked her to repeat it. · A) wasn't understanding B) didn't understand C) didn't understood D) don't understand
8	When I ___ at the airport, my friend ___ at the gate with flowers. · A) was arriving / was waiting B) arrived / was waiting C) was arriving / waited D) arrived / waited
9	At that moment, I ___ I would never see him again. · A) was knowing B) knew C) was know D) knows
10	While I ___ to the radio, I ___ that my favourite song was on. · A) listened / realised B) was listening / realised C) was listening / was realising D) listened / was realising



ANSWER KEYS

Check your answers

Practice · Which tense? (Part 7)

1	A — was dancing	Action in progress when I arrived → Past Continuous.
2	B — was cooking	'While' signals Past Continuous — the longer background action.
3	B — was looking	His attention was on the phone (in progress) → Past Continuous.
4	B — travelled	Completed trip with defined time → Past Simple.
5	A — was shining	Setting the scene → Past Continuous.
6	B — were you doing	'At 8 p.m.' = specific past moment → Past Continuous question.
7	A — didn't know	'Know' is stative — no -ing. Negative past = didn't + base form.
8	A — was sleeping	She was already in the middle of sleeping → Past Continuous.

Quiz · Part 10

1	B — was sleeping	Specific past moment, action in progress → Past Continuous.
2	B — woke	Completed action at specific past time. Irregular: wake → woke.
3	B — were watching	Longer action in progress that was interrupted → Past Continuous.
4	B — was raining	'All day' = continuous background → Past Continuous. 'It' takes 'was'.
5	B — was having	'Have' = experience here. In progress at that moment → Past Continuous.
6	A — were cooking	Two simultaneous past actions → both Past Continuous. Plural → were.
7	B — didn't understand	'Understand' is stative. Negative past = didn't + base form.
8	B — arrived / was waiting	When + Past Simple event, Past Continuous for what was already happening.
9	B — knew	'Know' is stative — no -ing form even in the past.
10	B — was listening / realised	While + Past Continuous for background. 'Realise' is stative → Past Simple.

Great work finishing Lesson 02! You can now set scenes with Past Continuous and drop events on them with Past Simple — the heart of every story you'll ever tell. In **Lesson 03**, we tackle Present Perfect: connecting the past to right now.