

PAST CONTINUOUS

THE FORM

The past progressive is formed with the past of *be* + the *-ing* form of the verb

I was

You were

He was

She was + *waiting*

It was

We were

You were

They were

Action in progress in the past

We use the past progressive to describe past situations or actions that were in progress at some time in the past:

*I **was living abroad in 1987**, so I missed the general election.*

Often we don't know whether the action was completed or not:

***She was working** on her essay last night.*

Adverbials beginning with *all* emphasize continuity:

*It was raining **all night/all yesterday/all the afternoon**.*

In the same way, *still* can emphasize duration:

***Jim was talking to his girlfriend** on the phone when I came in **and was still talking** to her when I went out an hour later*

Actions which began before something else happened

The past progressive and the simple past are often used together in a sentence. The past progressive describes a situation or action in progress in the past, and the simple past describes a shorter action or event.

The action or situation in progress is often introduced by conjunctions like *when* and *as just as, while*:

Just as I was leaving the house the phone rang

Jane met Frank Sinatra ***when she was living*** in Hollywood

Or the shorter action can be introduced by *when*:

We were having supper ***when the phone rang***

We can often use the simple past to describe the action in progress, but the progressive puts more emphasis on the duration of the action, as in the second of these two examples:

While I looked for some money, my friend paid the fares

While I was looking for some money, my friend paid the fares.

REPEATED ACTIONS/POLITE INQUIRES

We can emphasize the fact that two or more actions were in progress at the same time by using e.g. *while* or *at the time (that)*:

While I was working in the garden, my wife was cooking dinner

Repeated actions

This use is similar to that of the present progressive:

When he worked here, Roger was always making mistakes

Polite inquiries

This use is even more polite and tentative than the simple past:

I was wondering if you could give me a lift.

Past tenses in typical contexts

The simple past combines with other past tenses, such as the past progressive and the past perfect, when we are talking or writing about the past. Note that the past progressive is used for scene-setting. Past tenses of various kinds are common in story-telling, biography, autobiography, reports, eye-witness accounts, etc.:

On March 14th at 10 15 am I was waiting for a bus at the bus stop on the corner of Dover Road and West Street when a black Mercedes parked at the stop. Before the driver (had) managed to get out of his car, a number 14 bus appeared. It was evening. The sun was setting. A gentle wind was blowing through the trees. In the distance I noticed a Land Rover moving across the dusty plain. It stopped and two men jumped out of it.

It was just before the Second World War. Tom was only 20 at the time and was living with his mother He was working in a bank and travelling to London every day. One morning, he received a mysterious letter It was addressed to 'Mr Thomas Parker'