Past Continuous Tense

The **past continuous tense** is an important tense in English. We use it to say what we were in the middle of doing at a particular moment in the past.
In this lesson we look at the structure and the use of the past continuous tense, followed by a quiz to check your understanding:

How do we make the Past Continuous Tense?

The structure of the past continuous tense is:

subject	+	auxiliary verb BE	+	main verb
		conjugated in simple past tense		present participle
		was **were**		**base + ing**

For negative sentences in the past continuous tense, we insert **not** between the auxiliary verb and main verb. For question sentences, we exchange the **subject** and **auxiliary verb**. Look at these example sentences with the past continuous tense:

	subject	**auxiliary verb**		**main verb**	
+	I	was		watching	TV.
+	You	were		working	hard.
-	He, she, it	was	not	helping	Mary.
-	We	were	not	joking.	
?	Were	you		being	silly?
?	Were	they		playing	football?

How do we use the Past Continuous Tense?

The past continuous tense expresses action at a **particular moment** in the past. The action started before that moment but has not finished at that moment. For example, yesterday I watched a film on TV. The film started at 7pm and finished at 9pm.

At 8pm yesterday, I was watching TV.		
past	**present**	**future**
8pm		
At 8pm, I was in the middle of watching TV.		

When we use the past continuous tense, our listener usually knows or understands what time we are talking about. Look at these examples:

- I **was working** at 10pm last night.
- They **were** not **playing** football at 9am this morning.
- What **were** you **doing** at 10pm last night?
- What **were** you **doing** when he arrived?
- She **was cooking** when I telephoned her.
- We **were having** dinner when it started to rain.
- Ram went home early because it **was snowing**.

We often use the past continuous tense to "set the scene" in stories. We use it to describe the background situation at the moment when the action begins. Often, the story starts with the past continuous tense and then moves into the simple past tense. Here is an example:

" James Bond **was driving** through town. It **was raining**. The wind **was blowing** hard. Nobody **was walking** in the streets. Suddenly, Bond saw the killer in a telephone box..."

Past Continuous Tense + Simple Past Tense

We often use the past continuous tense with the simple past tense. We use the past continuous tense to express a **long** action. And we use the simple past tense to express a **short** action that happens **in the middle** of the long action. We can join the two ideas with **when** or **while**.

In the following example, we have two actions:

1. long action (watching TV), expressed with past continuous tense
2. short action (telephoned), expressed with simple past tense

past	**present**	**future**
Long action.		
I was watching TV at 8pm. 8pm You telephoned at 8pm.		
Short action.		

We can join these two actions with **when**:

- I was watching TV **when** you telephoned.

(Notice that "when you telephoned" is also a way of defining the time [8pm].)

We use:

- **when** + **short action** (simple past tense)
- **while** + **long action** (past continuous tense)

There are four basic combinations:

	I was walking past the car	**when**	it exploded.
When	the car exploded		I was walking past it.
	The car exploded	**while**	I was walking past it.

While	I was walking past the car		it exploded.

Notice that the **long action** and **short action** are relative.

- "Watching TV" took a few hours. "Telephoned" took a few seconds.
- "Walking past the car" took a few seconds. "Exploded" took a few milliseconds.

Exercise 1: Put the verb in brackets into the Past Continuous Tense

1. We _____ (try) to be as quiet as possible so as not to disturb the dog which _____ (sleep)
2. None of us _____ (swim) for the sea was rough but we _____ (play) ball on the beach instead.
3. The dogs _____ (fight) over a bone and _____ (make) a lot of noise.
4. "What _____(you, do) when I came in?"
5. I _____ (call) Roger at nine last night, but he _____ (be, not) at home. He _____ (study).
6. I got the package in the mail. When I _____(open) it, I _____ (find) a surprise.
7. Stanley _____ (climb) the stairs.
8. My brother and sister _____ (argue) about something when I walked into the room.
9. I did not heard the thunder during the storm last night because I _____ (sleep).
10. Tina _____(study) English at this time yesterday.

Exercise 2: Past Continuous Tense vs Simple past tense

1. I _____ (walk) home when I _____ (met) him.
2. She _____ (see) Ryan yesterday but he _____ (not/see). He _____ (look) the other way.
3. The door bell _____ (rang) while he _____ (cook) the dinner.

4. She _____ (go) abroad last year but she _____ (go, not) because she _____ (get) cold.
5. I _____ (walk) along the street when suddenly I _____ (hear) footsteps behind me.
6. When I was young. I _____ (want) to be a bus driver.
7. Marry _____ (fall) asleep while she _____ (read) a novel.
8. The television was on but nobody_____ (watch) it.

References

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