Past Simple vs Past Continuous

Choice of emphasis
Often there is little difference between the past continuous and the past simple, except that the past continuous suggests that the event(s) were in progress at a time in the past or that they were happening as background or temporary events. Whether we choose to use the past continuous or past simple often depends on how we see the past event(s).

Emphasising main events with the past simple
When one event is more important than the other in the past, we can use the past simple to emphasise the main event. We can use the past continuous for the background event (the less important one):

[background event] **[main event]**
*I **was listening** to the radio when Helen **phoned**.*

EXERCISE

1 When the earthquake *(begin)* _____, they *(sleep)* _____.

2 He *(buy)* _____ that picture because the woman in it *(smile)* _____.

3 Last night, I *(wake)* _____ up at 4 o'clock and unfortunately I *(can)* _____ fall sleep again.

4 When my sister *(not use)* _____ the camera, I *(break)* _____ it.

5 While we *(watch)* _____ the football match, he *(go)* _____ to bed.

6 My boyfriend *(jog)* _____ when he *(meet)* _____ my mother.

7 While she *(wait)* _____ for him, she *(switch)* _____ on the radio.

8 My daughter *(have)* _____ a nightmare when the alarm *(go)* _____ off.

9 The sun *(not shine)* _____ when I *(get)* _____ up this morning.

10 My parents *(find)* _____ that photo when they *(tidy)* _____ the garage

LIVEWORKSHEETS