

Past Continuous or Past Simple?

1 Introduction

A reporter is interviewing Mike and Harriet.

Reporter: *Mike and Harriet, tell me what you **saw**.*

Harriet: *Well, when we **were driving** home last night, we **saw** a strange object in the sky.*

Mike: *As we **were coming** down the hill into town, it just suddenly **appeared** in front of us.
We **stopped** the car and **got** out.*

Harriet: *It **was** a very clear night. The stars **were twinkling**.*

Mike: *It **was** a spaceship. It **seemed** quite big. It **had** some strange writing on the side. And a light **was flashing** on the top.*

Harriet: *As we **were watching** it, it suddenly **flew** away and **disappeared**.*

PAST CONTINUOUS

We use the Past Continuous for an action that we were in the middle of.

*We **were driving** home.*

(We were in the middle of our journey.)

*A light **was flashing**.*

We do not normally use the Past Continuous for states. See Unit 7.

NOT *The spaceship **was seeming** ...*

NOT *It **was having** writing ...*

NOT *I **wasn't knowing** ...*

PAST SIMPLE

We use the Past Simple for a complete action in the past.

*We **drove** home.*

(We finished our journey.)

*The spaceship **flew** away.*

We also use the Past Simple (not normally the Continuous) for states. See Unit 7.

*The spaceship **seemed** quite big.*

*It **had** writing on the side.*

*I **didn't know** what it was.*

2 It happened as I was driving

We often use the Past Continuous and Past Simple together when one (shorter) action comes in the middle of another (longer) one.

*As we **were driving** down the hill, a strange object **appeared** in the sky.*

*While Laura **was sitting** in the garden, it suddenly **began** to rain.*

*You **drove** right past me when I **was waiting** for the bus.*

The appearance of the strange object comes in the middle of the longer action, the drive down the hill.

Longer action: *We **were driving** down the hill.*

Shorter action: *An object **appeared**.*

In the three sentences above, the Past Continuous comes after **as**, **while** or **when** (*As we **were driving** ...*). We can also use **when** before the Past Simple.

*We **were driving** down the hill **when** a strange object **appeared** in the sky.*

*David **was making** lunch **when** the phone **rang**.*

But we use two Past Simple verbs for one action after another.

*When we **saw** the spaceship, we **stopped** the car. (= We saw it and then we stopped.)*

3 The sun was shining

PAST CONTINUOUS

We often use the Past Continuous to describe the background.

*The sun **was shining**.*

*The stars **were twinkling**.*

PAST SIMPLE

We use the Past Simple for actions in a story.

*We **arrived** at the beach.*

*The aliens **landed** quietly.*

Practice

A Past Continuous or Past Simple? (1-2)

David is always having accidents. His girlfriend Melanie is talking about some of the accidents. Write her sentences from these notes. Each sentence has one verb in the Past Continuous and one in the Past Simple.

▶ when / he / carry / a suitcase / he / drop / it / on his foot
When he was carrying a suitcase, he dropped it on his foot.

▶ he / break / his leg / when / he / ski
He broke his leg when he was skiing.

1 he / sit down / on a chair / while / I / paint / it

2 as / he / run / for a bus / he / collide / with a lamppost

3 his hair / catch / fire / when / he / cook / chips

4 when / he / hold / a beautiful vase / he / suddenly / drop / it

5 he / sit / in the garden / when / a wasp / sting / him / on the nose

B Past Continuous or Past Simple? (1-2)

Put in the correct form of the verb.

Rita: I hear the lights (▶) went (go) out in your flats last night.

Emma: Yes, (▶) I was watching (I / watch) a documentary on TV when suddenly

(1) (we / lose) all the power. But

(2) (it / come) on again after about ten minutes.

Vicky: Rachel (3) (come) down the stairs when the lights

(4) (go) out. She almost (5)

(fall) over.

Daniel: Matthew and I (6) (play) table tennis at the time.

Andrew: (7) (I / work) on the computer. (8)

..... (I / lose) a whole hour's work. But this morning (9)

..... (I / get) up early and (10) (do) it again.

C Past Continuous or Past Simple? (1-3)

Find the second part of each sentence. Put each verb into the correct form.

▶ Vicky (have) a beautiful dream when she (touch) the wire.

▶ When Andrew (see) the question, when I (find) a £10 note in it.

1 The train (wait) when the alarm clock (ring).

2 I (read) a library book the crowd (rush) in.

3 Sarah (have) an electric shock he (know) the answer immediately.

4 When the doors (open), they (see) that the sun (shine).

5 When the campers (wake), when we (arrive) at the station.

▶ Vicky was having a beautiful dream when the alarm clock rang.

▶ When Andrew saw the question, he knew the answer immediately.

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