

**narrative tenses: describing specific incidents in the past**

This happened when I **was** about five years old. My father **had gone away** on business for a few days and my brother and I **were sleeping** in my parents' bedroom. Before we **went** to bed that night, I **had been reading** a very scary story about a wicked witch. In the middle of the night I **woke up** with a start and **saw** that a figure in a dark coat **was standing** at the end of my bed. I **screamed** at the top of my voice.

- When we describe specific incidents in the past, we use **narrative tenses**, i.e. the past simple, past continuous, and past perfect simple or continuous.
- Use the past simple to talk about the main actions in a story (*We went to bed... I woke up... I screamed*).
- Use the past continuous to set the scene (*We were sleeping in my parents' bedroom*) and to describe actions in progress in the past (*Somebody was standing at the end of my bed*).
- Use the past perfect and the past perfect continuous to talk about the earlier past, i.e. things which happened before the main events (*My father had gone away... I had been reading a story*).

**used to and would: describing repeated actions in the past**

- Every summer my family **rented** an old house in the South of France. My sister and I **used to walk** to the harbour every morning and watch the fishermen cleaning their nets.
- Every night before we **went** to bed my mother **would tell** us a story, but she **would never read** them from a book – she **would always make them up** herself.
- When I was a teenager, my friends **were always teasing** me because of my red hair.

- We often use **used to** + infinitive as an alternative to the past simple to talk about things that we did repeatedly in the past.
- We can also use **used to** + infinitive to talk about situations or states which have changed, e.g. *I used to have much longer hair when I was younger*.
- We also use **would** + infinitive as an alternative to **used to** to talk about things that we did repeatedly in the past.
- However, we **don't** use **would** with stative verbs, i.e. to talk about situations or states which have changed NOT *I would have much longer hair when I was younger*.
- We can also use **always** + past continuous for things that happened repeatedly, especially when they were irritating habits.

**⚠** When we describe past habits or repeated past actions we tend, for stylistic reasons, to use a mixture of **used to**, **would**, or the past simple (with adverbs of frequency). **Used to** and **would** make it clear that you are talking about something that happened regularly and often convey a sense of nostalgia.

**a** Circle the right form. Tick if both are correct.

Corinne and I **(used to be)** / **would** be very close, but recently we've grown apart.

- When I came into the room, my aunt **sat** / **was sitting** with her back to me. When she turned round, I could see that her eyes were rather red and I was sure that she **had been crying** / **had cried**.
- Our grandmother **always used to have** / **would always have** a little surprise waiting for us when we visited.
- My uncle **lived** / **used to live** on his own because his wife **died** / **had died** several years earlier.
- When my brother was a child, **he didn't use to look** / **he wouldn't look** at all like my father, but the older he gets the more he looks like him.
- When I was small, **I was always getting** / **I always used to get** into trouble at school and my parents **used to punish** / **would punish** me by not letting me play with my friends at the weekend.
- Suddenly we heard a tremendous crash and we saw that a car **crashed** / **had crashed** into a tree and petrol **poured** / **was pouring** out of the car onto the road.

**b** Put the verbs in the right form, using a narrative tense or **would** / **used to**.**My earliest memory**

When I was about four or five, my grandmother, who was Polish, **was living** (live) in London, and we children often 1 **spent** (spend) weekends at her flat. My grandfather 2 **died** (die) a couple of years earlier, so I suppose she was in need of company. We loved going there, as my grandmother 3 **cooked** (cook) special meals for us and 4 **took** (take) us for lovely walks in Regent's Park, which was quite nearby. One occasion that I remember really well was when I 5 **invited** (invite) to stay with her on my own, without my brothers and sisters. On the first day, after lunch, my grandmother 6 **told** (tell) me that she 7 **go** (go) to have a rest, and that I should have a rest too. I 8 **try** (try) to sleep but I couldn't, so after a while I 9 **get** (get) up and 10 **decided** (decide) to explore the flat. Everything was very quiet so I was convinced that my grandmother 11 **sleep** (sleep). The room I most 12 **wanted** (want) to explore was my grandfather's study, I imagine, precisely because I 13 **tell** (tell) not to go in there. I opened the door and went in, and was immediately drawn to his large old desk. I 14 **climb** (climb) onto the chair, and 15 **see** (see) on the desk a green pen in a kind of stand, with a bottle of ink.

I 16 **ask** (ask) my parents for a real pen for a long time, but they 17 **refuse** (refuse), foreseeing the mess that I was almost bound to make with the ink. I picked up the pen and then tried to open the bottle of ink. At that moment I 18 **hear** (hear) my grandmother's voice saying 'Christina? Where are you? What are you doing?' To my horror I 19 **realize** (realize) that my grandmother 20 **get up** (get up) out of bed and 21 **come** (come) towards the study. Two seconds later she 22 **open** (open) the door. I will never forget the awful feeling of shame that she 23 **catch** (catch) me doing something that she 24 **forbid** (forbid) me to do.