

Narrative Tenses

Past simple

We use the past simple:

- for specific single or repeated actions or events in the past.
Dan went climbing every weekend last summer.
- to give further information following a present perfect question or statement.
'Have you been skiing this year?' 'Yes, I went in January.'

Past continuous

We use the past continuous for:

- an action that was in progress at a particular moment in the past or when an interruption happened. (We use the past simple for the interruption.)
At 8 p.m. yesterday evening, we were having dinner. I was getting ready for bed when the phone rang.
- setting the scene.
It was raining hard. Pedestrians were hurrying along the pavement or sheltering in shop fronts.
- showing that an action is repeated or continuous.
I was practising the guitar every day but I wasn't getting any better.
- She was singing out of tune and I was trying not to laugh.

Past perfect simple

We use the past perfect simple for:

- an event that happened before another event in the past.
We arrived at 11.15 but the bus had already left.
- a situation that continued up to a certain point in the past.
She retired last month. She'd worked at the school for ten years.
- wishes and regrets with expressions like *I wish ..., if only*, etc.
I wish she hadn't told everyone my news.
If only we'd arrived ten minutes earlier!

Past perfect continuous

We use the past perfect continuous:

- for an action that continued up to a certain point in the past **or** happened repeatedly up to that point.
The announcement wasn't a surprise: everyone had been expecting it.
- I knew her well. We'd been going to the same dance class every week for years.
- to explain what led to a particular situation in the past.
My shoes were muddy because I'd been playing football in the park.
- to say how long a situation had been in progress.
He'd been trying to find a new job for months.
- for wishes and regrets with expressions like *I wish ..., if only*, etc.
I wish you'd been listening.
If only I hadn't been wearing sandals!

Note that we do not use the past perfect continuous with verbs that are not used with continuous tenses (e.g. *believe, understand*, etc.).

Complete the sentences with the correct past tense form of the verb in brackets. Sometimes more than one answer is possible.

- 1 I went back to the shop to look at the guitar again, but unfortunately it wasn't there – somebody _____ (buy) it.
- 2 As I opened the door, everyone _____ (become) silent, and I knew at once that they _____ (talk) about me.
- 3 It was 10 p.m., and although I _____ (write) for nearly an hour, I still _____ (not finish) the letter yet.
- 4 One of the glasses _____ (break) as I _____ (put) them back in the cupboard.
- 5 When I got home, I saw that Bess _____ (sit) on the front doorstep. I wish she _____ (tell) me she was there!
- 6 I _____ (take) off my football boots, _____ (clean) them and _____ (leave) them in the sun to dry.

Correct the mistakes. Some sentences do not have a mistake.

- 1 Before the summer, the team were training hard twice a week, but they weren't winning many matches.
- 2 Although I'd been watching the film for nearly an hour, I hadn't been understanding much of the plot.
- 3 It had snowed a lot overnight, but by the time we left the house, it didn't snow any longer.
- 4 As my mum was climbing out of the boat, she was falling into the river with a big splash.

- 5 If only I hadn't spent all my money on presents!
- 6 While she washed up, she accidentally broke a plate.
- 7 I didn't get a very good mark in my science test because I hadn't been finishing all the questions.
- 8 I loved football when I was at primary school. If I wasn't playing football, I was reading about it.

Complete the text with the verbs in brackets. Use the past simple, past continuous or past perfect (simple or continuous). Sometimes more than one tense is possible.

In 2004, Daniel Tammet boarded a plane to Reykjavik accompanied by a TV crew. He ¹ _____ (travel) to Iceland to attempt something incredible: Daniel ² _____ (decide) to learn Icelandic in just one week. For several years, Daniel ³ _____ (surprise) people with his amazing mental abilities. A few months earlier, he ⁴ _____ (astound) experts by reciting the number pi to 22,500 decimal places from memory. And four years before that, he ⁵ _____ (come) fourth in the World Memory Championships. But in trying to learn such a difficult language in only seven days, he ⁶ _____ (take) on his greatest challenge so far. Although Daniel ⁷ _____ (learn) languages successfully for years, after two days of Icelandic, he ⁸ _____ (struggle). He ⁹ _____ (not make) much progress, it seemed. But then everything ¹⁰ _____ (change). 'Suddenly he was like a sponge,' his teacher remembers. 'He ¹¹ _____ (absorb) grammar and vocabulary at an amazing speed.' After seven days, to see how well he ¹² _____ (learn) the language, Daniel ¹³ _____ (appear) on TV and ¹⁴ _____ (succeed) in giving an interview in fluent Icelandic.