

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