

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

- 1 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.
- 2 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.
- 3 When I was a teenager, my friends **were always teasing** me because of my red hair.

- 1 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*.
- 2 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*.
- 3 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.

- 1 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*.
- 2 Our grandmother *always used to have* / *would always have* a little surprise waiting for us when we visited.
- 3 My uncle *lived* / *used to live* on his own because his wife *died* / *had died* several years earlier.
- 4 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.
- 5 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.
- 6 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 _____ (spend) weekends at her flat. My grandfather 2 _____ (die) a couple of years earlier, so I suppose she was in need of company. We loved going there, as my grandmother 3 _____ (cook) special meals for us and 4 _____ (take) us for lovely walks in Regent's Park, which was quite nearby. One occasion that I remember really well was when I 5 _____ (invite) to stay with her on my own, without my brothers and sisters. On the first day, after lunch, my grandmother 6 _____ (tell) me that she 7 _____ (go) to have a rest, and that I should have a rest too. I 8 _____ (try) to sleep but I couldn't, so after a while I 9 _____ (get) up and 10 _____ (decide) to explore the flat. Everything was very quiet so I was convinced that my grandmother 11 _____ (sleep). The room I most 12 _____ (want) to explore was my grandfather's study, I imagine, precisely because I 13 _____ (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) onto the chair, and 15 _____ (see) on the desk a green pen in a kind of stand, with a bottle of ink.

I 16 _____ (ask) my parents for a real pen for a long time, but they 17 _____ (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) my grandmother's voice saying 'Christina? Where are you? What are you doing?' To my horror I 19 _____ (realize) that my grandmother 20 _____ (get up) out of bed and 21 _____ (come) towards the study. Two seconds later she 22 _____ (open) the door. I will never forget the awful feeling of shame that she 23 _____ (catch) me doing something that she 24 _____ (forbid) me to do.