

WHILE VS WHEN

When we use the past continuous (or progressive) we usually see a short action that interrupts the long action, like this:

Past Progressive



A Shorter Action Interrupts a Longer Action

While I was cooking dinner, the phone rang.

This is known as “interrupted action”, there is something happening, when another thing interrupts that action:

	I was watching TV	when	Jim knocked the door.
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As you can see in the example, something interrupts another something, and a helpful word that always goes with this kind of sentence is the “WHEN” (*cuando*): a person was doing something “WHEN” another thing broke that action.

Another way of talking about this situation is using the connector “WHILE” (*mientras*):

While	I was watching TV	,	Jim knocked the door
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A thing was happening, and then something interrupted the action that WAS happening.

Two tools to say the same thing:

'when' + short action (past simple tense)

'while' + long action (past continuous tense)

I was watching TV when Jim knocked the door.

	I was watching TV	when	Jim knocked the door.
When	Jim knocked the door	,	I was watching TV
	Jim knocked the door	while	I was watching TV
While	I was watching TV	,	Jim knocked the door