3

GRAMMAR

Past time

Basic contrasts: past simple and past continuous

- Past simple generally refers to:
  Completed actions
  *I **got** up, **switched off** the radio, and **sat** down again.*
  Habits
  *Every day I **went** to the park.*
  States
  *In those days, I **didn't like** reading.*

- Past continuous (progressive) generally refers to:
  Actions in progress (often interrupted by events)
  *I **was drinking** my coffee at the time.*
  *While I **was opening** the letter, the phone rang.*
  Background description in narrative
  *I entered the office and looked around. Most people **were working** at their desks, but Jane **was staring** out of the window and **pretending** to write something at the same time.*
  Changing states
  *The car **was getting** worse all the time. One of the headlights **was** gradually **falling** off, and the engine **was making** more and more funny noises.*
  Repeated actions – criticism
  With a frequency adverb, this use is similar to the use of present continuous to express annoyance.
  *When Jane was at school, she **was** always **losing** things.*

- Past continuous is not used to describe general habitual actions, without the sense of criticism mentioned above. Past simple is used for this meaning.
  *When I **lived** in London, I **walked** through the park every day.*

Past perfect simple and continuous

- We use the past perfect when we are already talking about the past, and we want to go back to an earlier past time ('past in the past').
  *By the time I got to the station, the train **had left**.*
  Compare this with:
  *The train **left** five minutes before I got to the station.*
  When we talk about a sequence of past events in the order that they happened, we more commonly use the past simple, especially with quick, short actions.

- Past perfect continuous (progressive)
  The same contrasts between past simple and past continuous (see previous section)

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can be made in past perfect verb forms for events further back in the past.

*I **had been living** in a bed-sitter up to then.*
*While I **had been talking** on the phone, Jimmy had escaped.*
*The whole place was deserted, but it was obvious that someone **had been living** there.*
*They'**d been cooking** in the kitchen for a start, and they hadn't bothered to clear up the mess.*

- Past perfect is also common in reported speech. See Grammar 13.
- Past perfect is not used simply to describe an event in the distant past.

Used to and *would*

- *Used to*

This often contrasts with the present. The contrast may be stated or understood. There is no present tense form 'use to'.

*I **used to go** swimming a lot* (but I don't now).

The negative form is either: *I didn't use to* or *I used not to* (rare for some speakers). The form *I didn't used to* may also be found. This is usually considered incorrect, unless we consider *used to* as an unchanging semi-modal form.

- *Would*

This describes repeated actions, not states. It describes a habitual activity which was typical of a person or a time period.

*Every week he'**d buy** his mother a bunch of flowers.* (habitual activity)
*I **used to like** cowboy films.*

Where we use *would* to describe a habitual activity, *used to* is also possible.

*Every week he **used to buy** his mother a bunch of flowers.*

Would is more common in written language and often occurs in reminiscences.

Unfulfilled past events

- These describe events intended to take place, but which did not happen.

*I **was going to phone** you, but I forgot.*
*I **was thinking of going** to Italy this year, but I haven't decided.*
*I **was about to do** it, but I started doing something else.*
*Jack **was to have taken part**, but he fell ill.*

- The contrasting past event is often understood, but not stated.

*How are you? I **was going to phone** you ...* (but I didn't).

Polite forms

These are common with *wonder*.

*I **was wondering** if you wanted to come to the cinema.*

See Grammar 9 and 10 for comment on this.

Contrasts with present perfect verb forms

See Grammar 4 for contrasts between past simple and present perfect verb forms. Past verb forms are also used to express unreal time. See Grammar 7 and 8.

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1 Underline the correct word or phrase in each sentence.

1 When you passed the town hall clock, *did you notice/were you noticing* what time it was?
2 Last night my neighbours *were shouting/would shout* for hours and I couldn't get to sleep.
3 When you lived in London, *did you use to travel/were you travelling* by bus?
4 Everyone was having a good time, although not many people *danced/were dancing*.
5 Jill was really hungry because she *didn't eat/hadn't eaten* all day.
6 We decided to go to the cinema, but before that we *went/had gone* for a pizza.
7 It took a while for me to notice, but then I did. Everyone *stared/was staring* at me. What had I done wrong?
8 Nobody bothered to tell me that the school *decided/had decided* to have a special holiday on Friday.
9 I *was trying/tried* to get in touch with you all day yesterday. Where were you?
10 A: Excuse me, but this seat is mine.
B: I'm sorry, I *didn't realize/wouldn't realize* that you were sitting here.



2 Underline the correct word or phrase in each sentence.

1 *Once/Afterwards* I'd read the instructions, I found it easy to assemble the bookcase.
2 It was more than a month *before/until* I realized what had happened.
3 I managed to talk to Carol just *as/while* she was leaving.
4 It wasn't *until/up to* 1983 that Nigel could afford to take holidays abroad.
5 George always let me know *by the time/whenever* he was going to be late.
6 I was having a bath *at the time/that time*, so I didn't hear the doorbell.
7 We bought our tickets and five minutes *after/later* the train arrived.
8 According to Grandpa, people used to dress formally *those days/in his day*.
9 Everyone was talking but stopped *at that time/the moment* Mr Smith arrived.
10 The letter still hadn't arrived *by/until* the end of the week.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

3 Decide if the verb form underlined is correct or not. If it is correct, write a tick (✓). If not, correct it.

Text 1

The train (1) ground to a halt at a small station miles from London, and it (2) became apparent that it (3) had broken down. Everyone (4) was getting their cases down from the luggage racks, and we (5) were waiting on the platform in the freezing wind for hours until the next train (6) was turning up.

1 ✓ 3 ..... 5 .....
2 ..... 4 ..... 6 .....

Text 2

The mysterious disappearance of Professor Dawson (1) was on Inspector Gorse's mind. Six months before the Professor's disappearance, he (2) was receiving a letter from Jean Dawson, the Professor's wife. In the letter, Jean (3) accused her husband of plotting to murder her. Gorse (4) considered his next step when the phone rang. It was Sergeant Adams from the Thames Valley police force. A fisherman (5) discovered a body in the river, and it (6) fitted the description of the Professor.

1 ..... 3 ..... 5 .....
2 ..... 4 ..... 6 .....

4 Complete the text with a suitable past tense form of the verbs in brackets.

This time last year I (1) ...was cycling... (cycle) in the rain along a country road in France with a friend of mine. We (2) ..... (decide) to go on a cycling holiday in Normandy. Neither of us (3) ..... (be) to France before, but we (4) ..... (know) some French from our time at school and we (5) ..... (manage) to brush up on the basics. Now we (6) ..... (wonder) if we (7) ..... (make) the right decision. We (8) ..... (plan) our route carefully in advance, but we (9) ..... (forget) one important thing: the weather. It (10) ..... (rain) solidly since our arrival and that night we (11) ..... (end up) sleeping in the waiting room at a railway station. Then the next morning as we (12) ..... (ride) down a steep hill, my bike (13) ..... (skid) on the wet road and I (14) ..... (fall off). I (15) ..... (realize) immediately that I (16) ..... (break) my arm, and after a visit to the local hospital I (17) ..... (catch) the next train to Calais for the ferry home. Unfortunately my parents (18) ..... (not/expect) me home for a fortnight, and (19) ..... (go) away on holiday. So I (20) ..... (spend) a miserable couple of weeks alone, reading 'Teach Yourself French'.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

5 Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word given. Do not change the word given.

I intended to call you yesterday, but I forgot.
going
I ..... was going to ..... call you yesterday, but I forgot.

2 Sylvia asked if I wanted more pudding, but I said I couldn't eat any more.
had
When Sylvia offered ..... enough.

3 Owing to illness, Sally was unable to sing the solo, as arranged.
have
Sally was ..... but she fell ill.

4 Carol wasn't always as rude as that.
be
Carol ..... rude.

5 We've changed our minds about going to Rome, as originally intended.
intending
We ..... we've changed our minds.

6 When I lived in London, cycling to work was part of my daily routine.
used
When I lived in London, I ..... day.

7 I might possibly go to the theatre tonight.
wondering
I ..... going to the theatre tonight.

8 I had to go past your house so I decided to drop in.
passing
I ..... so I decided to drop in.

9 About 100 people were waiting for the late bus.
arrived
By ..... about 100 people waiting.

10 What were you doing at the moment of the explosion?
occurred
When ..... what were you doing?

LIVEWORKSHEETS

6 In each sentence decide whether one, or both, of the alternative verb forms given are appropriate. Write *O* for one or *B* for both.

1 In those days, I always *used to get up/got up* early in the morning. ...B...
2 When I got to the cinema Jack *had been waiting/was waiting* for me. .....
3 We *would always have/were always having* breakfast in bed on Sundays. .....
4 Mary *was always falling/always fell* ill before important examinations. .....
5 My sister *used to own/would own* a motorcycle and sidecar. .....
6 Pay no attention to Dave's remarks. He *wasn't meaning/didn't mean* it. .....
7 I felt awful after lunch. I *ate/had eaten* too much. .....
8 Brenda *left/had left* before I had time to talk to her. .....
9 The explanation was simple. In 1781 HMS Sovereign, on her way back from India, *had sighted/sighted* an empty boat drifting off the African coast. .....
10 Pauline has changed a lot. She *didn't always use to look/wasn't always looking* like that. .....

7 Complete the text by writing one word in each space.

I once (1) ...spent... a year in France, studying French at the University of Grenoble. Every Friday I (2) ..... eat at the Alps café. I never (3) ..... to spend much money, as I could not afford it, but it (4) ..... my local café and I enjoyed sitting there. Anyway, the story I'm going to tell you is something that really (5) ..... one day when I (6) ..... eating there. Suddenly a beautiful girl (7) ..... to my table and said, 'I was (8) ..... if you'd like to take a walk with me in the park?' I (9) ..... never seen her before, so I was rather shocked. I (10) ..... about to follow her when I noticed a tough-looking man watching our every movement. Realizing that I (11) ..... noticed him, the girl whispered to me, in English, 'Don't worry about him! Park – five minutes!', and then disappeared. Well, my bill (12) ..... ages to arrive, and by the time I (13) ..... to the park, there was no sign of the girl. I asked an old lady who was sitting there if she had (14) ..... a young girl waiting around. I described the girl to her. The old lady said that the girl (15) ..... had to rush off to the railway station. She had also left me a note. It said, 'I will explain everything. Meet me on platform 6.'

LIVEWORKSHEETS

8 Complete each sentence with a suitable past tense form of the verbs in brackets.

1 I realized that someone (steal) ...was stealing... my wallet when I (feel) ...felt... ..... their hand in my jacket pocket.

2 When I (phone) ..... Helen last night she ..... (wash) her hair.

3 Peter (offer) ..... me another drink but I decided I (had) ..... enough.

4 Nobody (watch) ..... , so the little boy (take) ..... the packet of sweets from the shelf and (put) ..... it in his pocket.

5 I (not/realize) ..... that I (leave) ..... my umbrella on the bus until it (start) ..... to rain.

6 At school I (dislike) ..... the maths teacher because he (always/pick) ..... on me.

7 Wherever Marion (find) ..... a job, there was someone who (know) ..... that she (go) ..... to prison.

8 Several years later I (find out) ..... that during all the time I (write) ..... to my pen friend, my mother (open) ..... and reading the replies!

9 I (not/understand) ..... what (go on) ..... . Several people (shout) ..... at me, and one passer-by (wave) ..... a newspaper in front of my face.

10 I (know) ..... I (do) ..... well in my exams even before I (receive) ..... the official results.

→ SEE ALSO
Grammar 4: Present perfect
Consolidation 1: Units 1–4
Grammar 7: Conditionals
Grammar 8: Unreal time
Grammar 9 and 10: Modals
Grammar 13: Reported speech

LIVEWORKSHEETS