

RULES

PAST SIMPLE

- states or actions (single or repeated) that finished in the past (often given with a specific time in the past) The committee **debated** the proposals for months.
- narration of single past actions in the order they occurred The dog **ran into** the garden and **chased** the cat, who **climbed up a tree**.

Time expressions: ago, last week / year, the day before yesterday, the other day, when, then, not until, whenever, later, after / afterwards, before / beforehand

Past Simple or Present Perfect?

- We use Present Perfect Simple to refer to past events (see Unit 1), but we don't normally use it when mentioning a specific past time.

Compare: I've submitted my application. I submitted my application last week.

- With time expressions like *today* and *this week / year*, we can use Past Simple if this time period is finished.
We only won three matches this season. (*The season is now over.*)
We have only won three matches this season. (*The season is not over – we may win more matches.*)
- With *since*, it is common to use Past Simple in the clause beginning with *since* and Present Perfect in the main clause.
Margaret **has developed** new interests **since** she **left** college. (**not:** *since she has left college X*)
- In American English it is possible to use the Past Simple with the adverbs such as *just, already, yet, ever, never, before*.
AmE Did you already see the movie? (British English: *Have you already seen that film?*)

PAST CONTINUOUS

- action in progress at a particular moment in the past or at the time something else happens I **was downloading** some files when the computer crashed.
- action or situation described as background to a more important event I **was talking** to John yesterday and he told me about his new job.
- temporary action in the past or action that was changing or developing In the summer of 1987, I **was working** for a law firm.
- annoying or amusing past habit (with *always, constantly, forever*) When we were at school, Andrew **was always forgetting** his lunch.
- plans that did not happen or expectations that were not fulfilled I **was expecting** to hear from you by Sunday.
- to describe past arrangements that may or may not have taken place I **was meeting** Sally in town so I didn't go to the lecture.

Time expressions: while, as, all day, at the time, back then, in those days, during

Notes

- Remember that stative verbs are not usually used in the continuous form. (See Grammar Appendix, page 216.)
I **didn't understand** what she was telling me. (**not:** *I wasn't understanding X*)
- We use the phrase *I was wondering if* to be polite when asking someone to do something or when we ask for information.
I **was wondering if** you could suggest a topic for my essay?
- The phrase *was thinking of* can be used to refer to something currently being considered for the future, but which is not yet definite.
I **was thinking of** signing up for a computer course.

PAST PERFECT SIMPLE

- past action or situation completed before a time or another action in the past
- to make the sequence of events clear
- with *first time / best / ever / never* when referring to a situation in the past (similar to Present Perfect)
- unfulfilled wishes / plans, often with *hope, plan, wish, expect, want, think about, mean to*

By the time the reporters arrived on the scene, the police **had solved** the case.

When Jane **had checked** her composition, she printed it out again. (*First she checked it, then she printed it.*)

My trip to France was the **first time** I **had ever been** abroad.

We'd **meant to** go and see my aunt but we didn't have time.

Time expressions: when, before, after, already, just, for, since, till, until, by the time, never, as soon as, no sooner ... than

Past Simple or Past Perfect?

- it is not necessary to use Past Perfect when a sequence of events is related in the order the events occur or if the chronological order is clear. In this case, we use Past Simple. We also prefer Past Simple for two actions when the second is a result of the first.

The curtain **rose** and the show **began**. (*not: The curtain had risen and the show began. X*)

- We do not use Past Perfect simply to say that something happened a long time ago.

PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS

- continuing / repeated past action or situation which continued up to a point in the past
- past action that was still relevant at a point in the past, or caused a visible result

We **had been walking** for hours before we saw any wildlife.

The house smelt fantastic because Mum **had been baking**.

Time expressions: since, for, all day / afternoon

Past Perfect Simple or Continuous?

- We use Past Perfect Simple for completed actions, but Past Perfect Continuous to emphasise the duration or result of the activity.

Greg **had prepared** his speech. (*The speech was ready.*)

Greg **had been preparing** his speech for days. (*We do not know if the speech was ready – the emphasis is on how much work Greg had done.*)

- We use Past Perfect Simple when we mention the number of times the action has been done.

George **had tried** to reach her on her mobile **three times**.

OTHER FORMS USED TO TALK ABOUT THE PAST

- **used to + bare infinitive**
repeated actions / states / habits in the past that contrast with the present

This palace **used to belong** to the royal family.

- **would + bare infinitive**
repeated actions in the past (*not* states)

When I was a kid, my gran **would bake** delicious biscuits.

- **future in the past**
When talking about the past, we use past forms of structures when we want to refer to the future.

will → *would*

is going to → *was going to*

is playing → *was playing*

are about to → *were about to*

I realised I **would need** more money.

Karen **was going to fax** me the details.

Jim **was playing** football later that evening.

They **were about to leave** when they got the message.