

The past continuous

Introduction



She **was playing** outside when it started to rain.

Construction

Subject + past simple of 'to be' + the **present participle** of another verb - I **was going**.

Affirmative	Negative 1	Negative 2	Interrogative
I was working	I was not working	I wasn't working	Was I working?
You were working	You were not working	You weren't working	Were you working?
He was working	He was not working	He wasn't working	Was he working?
She was working	She was not working	She wasn't working	Was she working?
It was working	It was not working	It wasn't working	Was it working?
We were working	We were not working	We weren't working	Were we working?
They were working	They were not working	They weren't working	Were they working?

Uses

Uses	Examples
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<p>To talk about something that was happening at a specific time or date. We do not know when the action started or finished and this is not important.</p>	<p>I was studying the past continuous at ten o'clock last night.</p> <p>It was raining all day yesterday.</p> <p>We were living in New Orleans in the 1980s.</p>
<p>To talk about something that happened during a specific period that we mention. The action fills the specified period.</p>	<p>What were you doing between 6.30 and 8 o'clock last Saturday evening?</p> <p>I was working in Japan from 1972 to 1984.</p> <p>They were playing football for most of the morning.</p>
<p>To talk about temporary situations in the past.</p>	<p>He was working in London last year but he's back in Paris now.</p> <p>Were you living in a hotel whilst working in London?</p> <p>I was feeding Jane's cats whilst she was on holiday.</p>
<p>When something else happens in the time period of the past continuous action.</p>	<p>I was leaving when the telephone rang.</p> <p>Our dog found a bone when he was digging in the garden.</p> <p>What was she doing when you saw her?</p>
<p>When two continuous actions were happening at the same time.</p>	<p>I was watching the television whilst Susan was cooking.</p> <p>What were you doing while John was painting the door?</p> <p>It wasn't raining when I was hanging out the washing.</p>

<p>With verbs of reflection and wishing in present situations and polite conversation.</p>	<p>I was thinking I might go for a walk later.</p> <p>I was wondering if you would mind helping me with this suitcase.</p> <p>I was hoping that Sheila would visit this weekend.</p>
<p>Abbreviated 'was going to', particularly with verbs describing motion. [Informal]</p>	<p>He was taking me to a restaurant tonight but now he has to work late.</p> <p>We were meeting at 10 o'clock but now it has been postponed.</p>
<p>For past habits with words like always, constantly and forever. Normally these sentences show disapproval.</p>	<p>Our previous temp was always having problems with his PC.</p> <p>My last boyfriend was constantly cancelling at the last minute.</p> <p>The children were forever playing on their 'gameboys'.</p>
<p>When explaining or asking for an explanation of a current or recent action, particularly if the action is seen as wrong.</p>	<p>What were you doing with my new computer? I was only borrowing it for a minute.</p> <p>Why were you looking in my desk drawer? I was searching for the key to the filing cabinet.</p>

For verbs that are not normally used in the continuous tense, please see the rules for **stative verbs**.

In English, there is often more than one way to say something. In certain cases, the use of the past simple past in the above examples is also grammatically correct. For example the sentence:

I **was watching** the television whilst Susan **was** cooking.

can also be expressed as:

I **watched** the television whilst Susan **cooked**.

Examples



He **was speaking** on his mobile when the train arrived.



The bags split when I **was coming** home from the supermarket.



He **was admiring** a painting when I saw him.



What **were you doing** between the hours of sunset and sunrise on the 28th September?



What **were you doing** with that biscuit? Well I **was thinking** of eating it.



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