

# 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 <b>was working</b>	I <b>was not working</b>	I <b>wasn't working</b>	<b>Was I working?</b>
You <b>were working</b>	You <b>were not working</b>	You <b>weren't working</b>	<b>Were you working?</b>
He <b>was working</b>	He <b>was not working</b>	He <b>wasn't working</b>	<b>Was he working?</b>
She <b>was working</b>	She <b>was not working</b>	She <b>wasn't working</b>	<b>Was she working?</b>
It <b>was working</b>	It <b>was not working</b>	It <b>wasn't working</b>	<b>Was it working?</b>
We <b>were working</b>	We <b>were not working</b>	We <b>weren't working</b>	<b>Were we working?</b>
They <b>were working</b>	They <b>were not working</b>	They <b>weren't working</b>	<b>Were they working?</b>

## Uses

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

<p>With verbs of reflection and wishing in present situations and polite conversation.</p>	<p>I <b>was thinking</b> I might go for a walk later.</p> <p>I <b>was wondering</b> if you would mind helping me with this suitcase.</p> <p>I <b>was hoping</b> that Sheila would visit this weekend.</p>
<p>Abbreviated 'was going to', particularly with verbs describing motion. [Informal]</p>	<p>He <b>was taking</b> me to a restaurant tonight but now he has to work late.</p> <p>We <b>were meeting</b> 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 <b>was</b> always <b>having</b> problems with his PC.</p> <p>My last boyfriend <b>was</b> constantly <b>cancelling</b> at the last minute.</p> <p>The children <b>were</b> forever <b>playing</b> 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 <b>were</b> you <b>doing</b> with my new computer? I <b>was</b> only <b>borrowing</b> it for a minute.</p> <p>Why <b>were</b> you <b>looking</b> in my desk drawer? I <b>was</b> <b>searching</b> 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**.

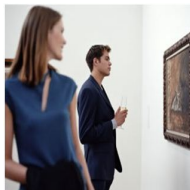
## Introduction



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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