

THE PAST CONTINUOUS TENSE

FORM

The past continuous tense is formed by the past tense of the verb **to be** + the present participle:

Affirmative

I was working
you were working
he/she/it was working
we were working
you were working
they were working

Negative

I was not working
you were not working
he/she/it was not working
we were not working
you were not working
they were not working

Interrogative

was I working?
were you working?
was he/she/it working?
were we working?
were you working?
were they working?

Negative contractions: *I wasn't working, you weren't working* etc.

Negative interrogative: *was he not/wasn't he working?* etc.

USE

1 Interrupted Action in the Past

Use the past continuous to indicate that a longer action in the past was interrupted. The interruption is usually a shorter action in the simple past of a specific time.

- I **was watching** TV when she called.
- When the phone rang, she **was writing** a letter.
- What **were you doing** when the earthquake started?
- Last night at 6 PM, I **was eating** dinner.
- At midnight, we **were still driving** through the desert.
- Yesterday at this time, I **was sitting** at my desk at work.

2 Parallel Actions (descriptions)

When you use the Past Continuous with two actions in the same sentence, it expresses the idea that both actions were happening at the same time. We often use a series of parallel actions to describe the atmosphere at a particular time in the past.

- I **was studying** while he **was making** dinner.
- While Ellen **was reading**, Tim **was watching** television.
- **Were you listening** while he **was talking**?
- They **were eating** dinner, **discussing** their plans, and **having** a good time.
- When I walked into the office, several people **were busily typing**, some **were talking** on the phones, the boss **was yelling** directions, and customers **were waiting** to be helped. One customer **was yelling** at a secretary and **waving** his hands. Others **were complaining** to each other about the bad service.

3 Repetition and Irritation with "Always"

The Past Continuous with words such as "always" or "constantly" expresses the idea that something irritating or shocking often happened in the past.

- She **was always coming** to class late.
- He **was constantly talking**. He annoyed everyone.
- I didn't like them because they **were always complaining**.

4 Used without a time expression it can indicate gradual development:

- *It was getting darker. The wind was rising.*

While vs. When

When you talk about things in the past, "when" is most often followed by the verb tense Simple Past, whereas "while" is usually followed by Past Continuous.

Examples:

- I was studying **when she called**.
- **While I was studying**, she called.