

English grammar: Past simple and continuous tense

Past simple

Form - regular verbs

Positive statement: *I watched, He watched*

Negative statement: *I did not watch (I didn't watch), He did not watch (He didn't watch)*

Question: *Did you watch?*

Neg. question: *Did you not watch? (Didn't you watch?)*

It is formed by -ed ending. It is the same for all persons, singular and plural.

Spelling

We add -d (not -ed) to the verbs that end with -e: *like - liked*

If the verb ends with a consonant and -y, we change -y into -i: *carry - carried, try - tried*.

But: *play - played*, because this verb ends with a vowel and -y.

If the verb has only one syllable and ends with a vowel and a consonant, we double the consonant to keep the same pronunciation: *stop - stopped*. The same rule applies to the verbs that end with -l: *travel - travelled*.

Form - irregular verbs

All the irregular verbs have different forms: *go - went, buy - bought, cut - cut* etc.

The question and negative are made in the same way: *I went - Did you go? No, I did not go.*

Notes

We do not use the auxiliary verb *did* with the verb *to be* and modal verbs.

Were you a student? Was he in London? I was not at home. He was not happy.

Could you sing? Could he come? I could not swim. He could not stay.

The auxiliary verb *did* is not used in questions beginning with *wh-* pronouns (*who, which*) in case that the pronoun is the subject of the question.

Who met you? (who is the subject)

Which train arrived on time? (which train is the subject)

But: *Who did you meet? Which train did you miss? (who and which train are the objects)*

The negative question normally shows a surprise.

Didn't you know it?

Use

1. We use the past simple for activities or situations that were completed in the past at a definite time.

a) The time can be given in the sentence:

I came home at 6 o'clock.

When he was a child, he didn't live in a house.

b) The time is asked about:

When did they get married?

c) The time is not given in the sentence, but it is clear from a context that the action or situation finished in the past.

He is 20 years old. He was born in Canada.

I've been to Iceland. (present perfect) - Did you enjoy it? (past simple)

2. We use it for repeated actions in the past.

We walked to school every day. - And did you ever go by bus?

3. It is used in stories to describe events that follow each other.

Charles entered the hall and looked around. He took off his coat and put it on a chair. He was at home.

Past continuous

Form

Positive statement: *I was watching, You were watching*

Negative statement: *I was not watching (I wasn't watching), You were not watching (You weren't watching)*

Question: *Were you watching? Was he watching?*

Neg. question: *Were you not watching? (Weren't you watching?) Was he not watching? (Wasn't he watching?)*

The past continuous tense is formed with the past tense of the verb *to be* and the present participle (-ing form).

Use

We use the continuous tense for actions or situations in the past that were not completed.

From 10 to 12 I was washing my car. I was in the garage.

(I did not finish my work. It was in progress. I started before 10 and finished after 12.)

The sun was setting. The beach was changing its colours.

(The sun was still in the sky when I was watching it.)

Compare this sentence with the past simple, which is used for completed activities:

From 10 to 12 I washed my car.

(I finished my work. I started at 10 and finished at 12.)

Finally, the sun set. It was dark and we did not see the beach anymore.

(The sun completely disappeared.)

We use it for continuous, uninterrupted activities. If the action is interrupted (something is done in more intervals or we did more things one after another), we must use the past simple.

Tom was watching TV on Sunday.

Tom watched TV in the morning and in the evening.

Yesterday I was working in the garden.

Yesterday I worked in the garden and on my house.

The past continuous tense is typically used:

1. Combined with the past simple tense to describe the idea that the action in the past continuous started before the action in the past simple and continued after it.

When she saw me, I was looking at the trees.

(These two activities happened at the same time. I was looking at the trees for some time and she saw me in the middle of it.)

Compare with the past simple:

When she saw me, I looked at the trees.

(These two activities happened one after another. First she saw me and then I looked at the trees.)

2. With a point in time to express an action that started before that time and continued after it.

At 8 o'clock Jane was having a bath.

(At 8 o'clock she was in the middle of the activity. She did not finish it.)

Compare with the simple tense:

At 8 o'clock Jane had a bath.

(She started the activity at 8 o'clock and finished it.)

3. To describe a situation, while the past simple is used to tell a story.

The sun was shining. Jack and Jill were lying on the beach. Jack was reading a book and Jill was sleeping.

All of a sudden, Jack raised his head. Jill woke up. Something happened.

4. For incomplete activities in contrast with the past simple, which is used for completed activities.

I was reading a book yesterday. And today I am going to continue.

I read the book yesterday. I can lend it to you now.

5. The past continuous can be used instead of the simple to show a more casual action:

I was talking to my neighbour yesterday. We had a nice chat.

(I did not do it on purpose. We just met in the street.)

I talked to my neighbour yesterday. And he promised to help me.

(I did it on purpose. I needed to ask him for help.)