
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Grammar

Past simple & past continuous



NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Rob

Hello. Welcome to 6 Minute Grammar with me, Rob.

Emma

And me, Emma. Hello.

Rob

In today's programme we're talking about the past simple and the past continuous tenses...

Emma

Yes, we'll look at when we use each tense...

Rob

We'll show you how to form the positive, negative and question forms of each one...

Emma

And as usual, we'll finish with a quiz.

Rob

And first, here's a quick reminder of the past simple. Hello Finn.

Finn

Hello Rob.

Rob

Could you give us an example please?

Finn

Last night I saw the film 'Titanic'.

Rob

Ooh Titanic, what a movie! Finn saw it last night. So, we use the past simple for completed actions in the past.

Emma

And we had the past simple of the verb **see**, which is the irregular form **saw**.

Rob

And as we know, you just have to learn the irregular verbs.

Emma

But the good news is that lots of verbs are regular, and to make them into the past simple, you just add **e** and **d** to the infinitive, like this:

Finn

Hundreds of passengers **jumped** into the sea.

Rob

Jump – **jumped**. Simple. To make past simple negatives, we add **didn't** to the infinitive, like this:

Finn

Sandra Bullock didn't win an Oscar for Gravity.

Rob

Now let's look at past simple questions. Emma, did you see the news last night?

Emma

Yes, I did.

Rob

So, for the question, it's: **did** plus the **subject** plus the **infinitive**.

Emma

And the short answers are: **Yes** plus **subject** plus **did**: **Yes, I did**.

Rob

Or: **No** plus **subject** plus **didn't**: **No, I didn't**.

Emma

So that's the past simple for completed actions in the past.

Rob

Now, to talk about past activities, we can use the past continuous. Here's an example:

Finn

I was watching a movie on TV. It was raining. We were feeling very bored.

Emma

Now, we can use the past continuous to talk about an activity that was already happening when something else happened, like this:

Finn

Dad was cooking dinner when the police arrived. The children were watching TV when the officers came into the living room.

Rob

Ooh the police! Very dramatic! Yes, think about one activity interrupting the other – the activity that was already happening is in the past continuous - **Dad was cooking dinner...**

Emma

And the activity that interrupted it is in the past simple: **the police arrived.**

Rob

So you can put the past simple and continuous together to talk about activities and actions that happened one on top of another.

Emma

Remember those examples everyone - I'm going to test you later!

Rob

OK. To make the past continuous, it's **was** or **were** plus an **i-n-g verb**.

Finn

Dad was cooking dinner. The children were watching TV.

Rob

Now to make the negative past continuous, you just put **wasn't** or **weren't** in front of the -ing verb, like this:

Finn

The baby wasn't sleeping. The children weren't playing games.

Rob

Wasn't sleeping and weren't playing. Wasn't and **weren't** are short forms of **was not** and **were not**.

Emma

Now for past continuous questions, it's **was** or **were**, with the **subject** plus an **i-n-g verb**. And I'm going to demonstrate this by testing you on the examples we had before. Rob, **was Mum cooking dinner?**

Rob

No, she wasn't: Dad was cooking dinner.

Emma

That's correct: well done. **Were the children playing games?**

Rob

No, they weren't.

Emma

Correct, well done again!

Rob

For past continuous short answers it's: **Yes** plus **subject** plus **was**, or: **No** plus **subject** plus **wasn't**.

IDENT

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Emma

Right, time for a quiz. I'm going to say a sentence and you have to choose the right verb form to go in the gap. Ready? OK. Number 1. When the phone rang, we _____ a film. Is it a) watched or b) were watching? When the phone rang, we _____ a film.

Rob

It's b) When the phone rang, we were watching a film.

Emma

Good, number 2: Cate Blanchett _____ an Oscar for Best Actress. Is it a) was winning or b) won? Cate Blanchett _____ an Oscar for Best Actress.

Rob

It's b) Cate Blanchett won an Oscar for Best Actress.

Emma

And here's the final question. Ready? When the police _____, Dad was cooking dinner. Is it a) arrived b) were arriving? When the police _____, Dad was cooking dinner.

Rob

When the police arrived, Dad was cooking dinner. Good old dad. Still cooking that dinner. What a hero!

Emma

So, well done if you got those right. And don't forget there's lots more about tenses on our website at www.bbclearningenglish.com. Join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar.

Both

Bye!