
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Grammar

Past perfect continuous



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute Grammar with me, Neil.

Catherine

And me, Catherine. Today, we're talking about the **past perfect continuous** tense...

Neil

... which we use to give background information to an event in the past. We'll give you lots of examples.

Catherine

We'll explain when to use the past perfect simple instead of the past perfect continuous...

Neil

... and of course we'll finish with a quiz.

Catherine

Let's start with an example. Here's Finn.

Finn

Joe and Alice got together in 2012. Joe had been living in London for two years when they met.

Catherine

So, we use the past perfect continuous to talk about something that was happening before another event or situation in the past. We can use it when we want to say how long this earlier action was happening for.

Neil

Now, in this case **Joe had been living** tells us what Joe was doing up to the time he met Alice.

Catherine

That's right. And the later action **when they met** was in the past simple. Let's hear that example again.

Finn

Joe and Alice got together in 2012. Joe had been living in London for two years when they met.

Neil

Here's another example. Which action happened first?

Finn

We had been trying to open the door for five minutes when I finally found the key.

Neil

So **we had been trying**, in the past perfect continuous, was the earlier action.

Catherine

Exactly. Sometimes, the action or situation that happens first in time comes second in the sentence. Listen to this:

Finn

Jack ran the marathon in less than three hours. He had been training for it since 2010.

Neil

So, the past perfect continuous phrase **he had been training** came in the second part of the sentence, but it happened earlier in time.

Catherine

Yes. And the event that happened later in time: **Jack ran the marathon**, was in the past simple and came first in the sentence.

Neil

Right. So, here's another sentence. Can you work out which action or happened first?

Finn

He missed the train, which he'd been hoping to catch.

Catherine

The earlier action was **he'd been hoping**.

Neil

That's right. So, in that example the past perfect continuous was in a relative clause: **which he had been hoping...**

Catherine

That's quite common with the past perfect continuous. And another common structure to use with past perfect continuous is a time conjunction, like this:

Finn

After I had been swimming for an hour, I was so cold I had to stop.

Neil

So, we had **after** plus **I had been swimming**.

Catherine

Yes, and that is the past perfect continuous in relative clauses and after time conjunctions.

Neil

Now, we form the past perfect continuous with **subject** plus **had been** and the **present participle** of the main verb. Here are those examples again, Finn.

Finn

Joe had been living...

We'd been trying...

I had been swimming...

Catherine

For negative sentences, it's **subject** plus **hadn't been** and the present participle.

Finn

I hadn't been waiting very long when the bus arrived.

Neil

And don't forget those short forms: **I had** becomes **I'd**; **We had** is **we'd**; **had not** is **hadn't** and so on.

IDENT

6 Minute Grammar from the BBC

Catherine

And we're talking about the past perfect continuous.

Neil

We often use it to give background information about a situation or event that was happening up to another event in the past...

Catherine

... which is usually in the past simple.

Neil

Sometimes we can use either the past perfect simple or the past perfect continuous, particularly for activities that continue for a long time, like **work, run or sleep**.

Catherine

So we can say:

Finn

Patrick felt refreshed because **he had slept** all afternoon.

Catherine

Or we can say:

Finn

Patrick felt refreshed because **he had been sleeping** all day.

Catherine

But if the earlier action had been completed, then we use the past perfect simple.

Finn

I'd already **cooked** supper when Jan got home.

Catherine

If the earlier action is incomplete, use the past perfect continuous, to focus on the process or length of time that the action continued, rather than the end result.

Neil

And, now it's time for our quiz. Which is correct? Number one: a) I'd only been waiting a few minutes when the bus arrived. b) I only waited a few minutes when the bus had arrived.

Catherine

It's a). We need the past perfect continuous for the earlier action or situation.

Neil

Correct. Number 2: a) After they'd been walking for three hours, they realised they were lost. b) After they walked for three hours, they'd realised they were lost.

Catherine

And it's a) again. The earlier action was the walking, so that's in the past perfect continuous.

Neil

Good, finally, number 3: a) Sam finally bought the car that he'd saved up for. b) Sam finally bought the car that he'd been saving up for.

Catherine

And this time, both are correct.

Neil

That's right. Well done if you got them all right. There's lots more about this on our website at bbclearningenglish.com. Join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar.

Both

Bye.