The past continuous shows an action that was in progress at a moment in the past. It is the tense of background scenes in stories: it sets the picture, and then shorter past simple actions happen inside that picture.

The form

- was or were + verb-ing: I was reading. They were playing.

- Use

When we use it

- An action in progress at a past moment: At midnight, we were still driving home.

- Two

Past simple or past continuous?

This is the pair learners mix up most. Use the past continuous for the long background action, and the past simple for the short action that interrupts it. Join them with when before the past simple, or while before the past continuous.

- *I was having a shower when the phone rang. (long action, short interruption)*
- *While I was having a shower, the phone rang. (while plus the long action)*
- *When she arrived, we were eating dinner.*
- *He broke his leg while he was playing football.*

A small warning: state verbs like know, want, believe and own do not usually take the continuous form. Say I knew the answer, not I was knowing the answer.

Spelling the -ing form

Base verb	-ing form	Rule
read	reading	just add -ing
make	making	drop the final -e
run	running	double the last letter, then add -ing
swim	swimming	double the last letter, then add -ing
die	dying	change -ie to -y, then add -ing
play	playing	a final -y never changes

See it in a story

Read this short paragraph and notice how the past continuous paints the background while the past simple carries the action: 'It was raining hard and the wind was blowing through the trees. We were walking home as fast as we could when suddenly the lights went out. While my brother was looking for a candle, I found

my phone and used it as a torch.' Three background actions set the scene, then two short actions move the story forward.

- *At seven this morning, the farmers were already working in the fields.*
- *She was not listening when the teacher explained the homework.*
- *The children were laughing and shouting in the playground at break time.*

Quick practice - choose past simple or past continuous

1. At nine last night, we ___ (watch) the news.
2. She ___ (fall) asleep while she was reading.
3. What ___ you ___ (do) when I called you?
4. While they were travelling in the north, they ___ (see) snow for the first time.
5. He was driving too fast when the police ___ (stop) him.

Answers

1. were watching - in progress at a past moment.
2. fell - a short, finished action.
3. were you doing - action in progress around the call.
4. saw - one finished event inside the long trip.
5. stopped - the short interrupting action.