

## Explanations

### Describing events in the past

#### ■ Main events

The past simple is used to describe finished actions and events in the past.

*Susan **went** into the station and **bought** a ticket.*

#### ■ Background description

The past continuous is used to describe actions in progress in the past. It gives information about the background situation.

*There were a lot of people waiting in the station. Some **were sleeping** on the benches, and others **were walking** up and down. Susan **was looking** for Graham, so she didn't sit down.*

#### ■ Past before past

The past perfect is used to make it clear that one past event happens before another past event. We use the past perfect for the earlier event.

*By the time the train arrived, Susan **had managed** to push her way to the front of the crowd.*

It is not always necessary to use the past perfect if a time expression makes the order of events clear.

***Before** the train arrived, Susan **managed** to push her way to the front of the crowd.*

#### ■ Past continuous used with past simple

We often use the past continuous first to set the scene, and then the past simple for the separate, completed actions that happen.

*Susan **was looking** for Graham, so she **didn't sit down**. Instead, she **tried** calling him on her mobile phone.*

We often contrast an action in progress with a sudden event which interrupts it.

*While Susan **was trying** to get onto the platform, a man **grabbed** her handbag.*

#### ■ Participle clauses

Participle clauses are introduced by the time expressions *before*, *after* and *while*. They have the same subject as the following clause.

***After struggling** with him, Susan **pulled** the bag from his hands.*

### Habits in the past

#### ■ Past simple

The past simple is used to describe past habits or states. A time expression is usually necessary.

*I always **got up** at six in those days. (habit)*

*I **lived** in Austria for several years. (state)*

■ *Used to*

*Used to* is used to describe past habits or states. A time expression is not necessary.

*I used to get up at six, but now I get up at eight.*

*I used to own a horse.* (I owned a horse once.)

With negatives and questions *used to* becomes *use to*.

*I didn't use to like beer.*

*Did you use to swim every day?*

When we use *used to* we suggest that the action is no longer true and so make a strong contrast with the present.

■ *Would*

*Would* is used to describe a person's typical activities in the past.

It can only be used to describe repeated actions, not states. It is mainly used in writing, and in personal reminiscences.

*Every evening was the same. Jack would turn on the radio, light his pipe and fall asleep.*

■ Past continuous

The past continuous can be used to describe a repeated action in the past, often an annoying habit. A frequency adverb is necessary.

*When Peter was younger, he was always getting into trouble.*

Politeness and  
uncertainty

We can use the past continuous with *think*, *hope* and *wonder* to give a polite or uncertain meaning.

*I was thinking of having a party next week.*

*I was hoping you would join us at the café tonight.*

*I was wondering if you could help me.*

## Practice

1 Choose a suitable description for each picture.



- a) When he left the house, Peter forgot that he had put his passport and wallet in his other jacket.
- b) After phoning the airport, Peter packed his suitcase.
- c) When he returned from Portugal in March, Peter put his passport and wallet in his jacket pocket.
- d) A few days before leaving for his summer holiday, Peter phoned the airport to check his flight.
- e) While Peter was packing his suitcase, he realised that he hadn't checked his flight.
- f) While Peter was packing his suitcase, the phone rang.

**2** Underline the most suitable verb form in each sentence. The first one is done for you.

- a) I suddenly remembered that I forgot/~~had forgotten~~ my keys.
- b) While Diana ~~watched~~/was watching her favourite television programme, there was a power-cut.
- c) Tom ~~used to live~~/would live in the house at the end of the street.
- d) Who ~~was driving~~/drove the car at the time of the accident?
- e) By the time Sheila got back, Chris ~~went~~/had gone.
- f) David ~~ate~~/had eaten Japanese food before, so he knew what to order.
- g) I ~~did~~/was doing some shopping yesterday, when I saw that Dutch friend of yours.
- h) I ~~used to like~~/was liking sweets much more than I do now.
- i) What exactly ~~were you doing~~/did you do when I came into your office yesterday?
- j) Laura missed the party because no-one ~~was telling~~/had told her about it.
- k) Tanya ~~would~~/used to be a doctor.

**3** Put each verb in brackets into a suitable past verb form. Only use the past perfect where this is absolutely necessary.

- a) While I (try) ..... was trying ..... to get my car started, a passing car (stop) ..... and the driver (offer) ..... to help me.
- b) The police (pay) ..... no attention to Clare's complaint because she (phone) ..... them so many times before.
- c) Mary (not wear) ..... her glasses at the time, so she (not notice) ..... what kind of car the man (drive) .....
- d) Nick (lie) ..... down on the grass for a while, next to some tourists who (feed) ..... the ducks.
- e) Tony (admit) ..... that he (hit) ..... the other car, but said that he (not damage) ..... it.
- f) Sorry, I (not listen) ..... to you. I (think) ..... about something else.
- g) Helen (feel) ..... very tired, and when she (finish) ..... her work, she (fall) ..... asleep.
- h) The police (get) ..... to Clare's house as fast as they could, but the burglars (disappear) .....
- i) I (phone) ..... you last night but you (not answer) ..... What (you do) ..... ?
- j) We (not go) ..... out yesterday because it (rain) .....

**4** Decide whether the verb form in *italics* is suitable or unsuitable.

- a) While I *had* a bath, someone knocked on the door. .... *unsuitable*.....
- b) Sally *didn't go* to a boxing match before. ....
- c) Harry tried to repair the car, but he didn't really know what he *was doing*.  
.....
- d) What *did you wear* to the Ponsonby's party? .....
- e) *Were you eating* spaghetti every day when you lived in Italy? .....
- f) I didn't know you *had bought* a new car. ....
- g) They all wanted to believe her, but suspected she *was lying*. ....
- h) As Peggy walked home, she tried to remember what *happened*. ....
- i), 'What a terrible day!' thought Lucy. Everything *had gone* wrong!  
.....
- j) Although it rained a lot, I *was enjoying* my holiday last year. ....

**5** Put each verb in brackets into a suitable past verb form.

When Professor Mallory, the famous archaeologist, (1) *invited*.....  
(invite) me to take part in his expedition to find the Lost City of the Himalayas,  
I (2) ..... (not hesitate) to accept his invitation. Mallory  
(3) ..... (discover) an ancient map showing the position of the  
city, although no European (4) ..... (ever go) to the area before.  
In fact, most of Mallory's colleagues either (5) ..... (believe)  
that the city (6) ..... (never exist) or (7) ..... (feel)  
that it (8) ..... (vanish) long ago and (9) .....  
(become) simply a legend. According to the Professor, the builders of the city  
(10) ..... (hide) it among the mountains in order to protect its  
immense riches. He (11) ..... (believe) that the descendants of  
these ancient people (12) ..... (still keep) themselves apart from  
the rest of mankind for the very same reasons. So when we  
(13) ..... (set off) on a cool May morning towards the distant  
mountains, each of us (14) ..... (look forward) to exciting  
discoveries. For a week or more we (15) ..... (climb) higher and  
higher, following the map, which Mallory (16) ..... (study) from  
time to time. Then one afternoon, while we (17) ..... (rest) at the  
top of a valley, we (18) ..... (notice) that a rider on a horse  
(19) ..... (wave) at us from the other side of the valley. A rider  
whose clothes (20) ..... (shine) like gold!

**6 Rewrite each sentence beginning as shown. Use a participle clause.**

- a) Norman collected the parcel, but then he realised it was the wrong one.  
After *collecting the parcel, Norman realised it was the wrong one.*
- b) Sue left the house but first she checked that she had her keys.  
Before .....
- c) Mark was parking his car when he noticed the wing-mirror was broken.  
While .....
- d) Julia cleaned the house, but then she fell asleep on the sofa.  
After .....
- e) Brian bought a new television, but first he checked all the prices.  
Before .....
- f) Alan was skiing in Switzerland and met his old friend, Ken.  
While .....
- g) Kate took two aspirins, and then she felt a lot better.  
After .....
- h) Sheila went out for the evening, but first she washed her hair.  
Before .....

**Key points**

- 1 The past simple describes completed events in the past, such as the main events in a narrative. It can also describe habits and routines in the past.
- 2 The past continuous is used for:
  - a) background description.
  - b) actions in progress, often contrasted with a sudden event.
 The past continuous cannot be used to describe past routines and habits.
- 3 Participle clauses can introduce a clause giving the main event. The subjects of both clauses must be the same.
- 4 The past perfect describes a past event which took place before another past event. If *before* or *after* is used, the past perfect is optional. The past perfect is not used for an event that happened a long time ago in the past.
- 5 *Used to* only refers to past time, and has no present form.
- 6 *Would* can be used to describe habitual actions in the past, usually in writing. It does not make such a strong contrast with the present as *used to*. Compare:
  - Jim would always make his mother a cup of tea after lunch.*
  - Jim used to drink tea, but now he prefers coffee.**Would* cannot be used to describe states.
  - Sally used to be a dancer.*

→ SEE ALSO

**Grammar 2:** Present perfect  
**Grammar 5:** Consolidation 1  
**Grammar 7 and 8:** Conditionals, Wishes and related forms  
**Grammar 14:** Time expressions