

Narrative tenses

English B2

What this topic teaches

A good story needs three tenses working together: the **past simple** for the events, the **past continuous** for the background, and the **past perfect** for the flashbacks. This is how English tells stories – and how B2 writing earns its marks.

- *The sun **was shining** (background) when I **left** the house (event). I **had forgotten** my keys (flashback). Disaster followed.*
- Memory hook: a story is a film. The past continuous is the **weather**, the past simple is the **action**, the past perfect is the **earlier scene** the film flashes back to.
- Chinese storytelling leans on order and words like and ; English paints the same picture with verb forms.

The three cameras

Tense	Camera job	Example
past continuous	the background, in progress	The rain was falling . People were hurrying home.
past simple	the events, one by one	I opened the door and stepped out.
past perfect	the earlier scene	I had left my umbrella at school.

- *while* and *when* manage the cameras: **While** *I was walking home, my phone rang*. Long action in the continuous, the interrupting event in the simple.
- *when* can also mean “after”: *When I got home, I ate*. Fine. But for background, *while/as + continuous* is the painter’s brush .

The story skeleton

Watch the tenses work:

It **was raining** and the streets **were** empty. I **was walking** home when I **saw** a small cat under a car. I **had never owned** a pet, but I **stopped**. The cat **looked** at me. It **had chosen** me, apparently . We **have been** inseparable ever since.

- Background (continuous) → event (simple) → flashback (perfect) → present result (present perfect, because the cat is asleep on my desk now).

- △ Don’t keep everything in the past simple: “*It rained. The streets were empty. I walked home.*” – grammatically fine, but the film becomes a police report . The tenses are your camera angles.

Interrupting and interrupted

Pattern	Meaning	Example
was/were + -ing ... when + past simple	long action interrupted	I was sleeping when the alarm rang .
past simple ... while + continuous	the event inside the background	The alarm rang while I was sleeping .
two continuous actions	two backgrounds at once	I was cooking while she was doing her homework.

- The alarm-clock rule: the long action wears the continuous; the interruption wears the simple. The phone always rings in the middle. It has a sense of timing and no shame.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ **Backgrounds need the continuous.** “*It rained and the streets were empty*” makes the rain an event. *It **was raining*** paints the weather behind the story.
- △ **Statives don’t wear the continuous, even in a story.** “*I was knowing the answer*” × → *I knew the answer*. The A2 rule is still on duty.
- △ **One flashback per scene is enough.** Set the clock with one *had*, then return to the simple: *I had left my umbrella at school. I walked back. The gate was closed*. Three flashbacks in a row and the reader gets dizzy.
- △ **Dāngshí and yǐjīng are time words; English tenses are verb forms.** You can’t just add a time word – the verb itself must change costume.

Say it aloud

Tell the story of your morning as a film.

- The alarm was screaming. I was dreaming about noodles. The noodles had betrayed me by being imaginary.
- I was running to the bus stop when I saw the bus leaving. It had seen me. It did not care.
- While I was walking sadly to school, the sun came out. I had never been so late. The cat under the car looked at me. We understood each other.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *I _____ (walk) home when I _____ (see) the cat.* – **was walking, saw.** Long background, short interruption.
2. *It _____ (rain) and the streets were empty.* – **was raining.** Weather is background, not an event.
3. *I _____ (never/own) a pet before that day.* – **had never owned.** The earlier scene: the flashback.
4. *“While I was knowing the answer...”* – $\times \rightarrow$ **While I knew the answer...** Statives never wear the continuous.
5. *She _____ (cook) while he _____ (do) his homework.* – **was cooking, was doing.** Two backgrounds at once.