

English B2 · Narrative tenses

Upper-intermediate English for Chinese speakers; classroom examples, not official exam items.

A story is a film

The past continuous is the weather, the past simple is the action, and the past perfect is the earlier scene the film flashes back to.

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.

Use the evidence

while and when manage the cameras: While I was walking home, my phone rang.

The story skeleton

One paragraph, three cameras

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.

Your turn: the interruption

Your turn

I ____ (sleep) when the alarm ____.

- A. slept ... was ringing
- B. was sleeping ... rang
- C. was sleeping ... was ringing
- D. had slept ... rang

Your turn: two backgrounds

Your turn

She ____ (cook) while he ____ (do) his homework.

- A. cooked ... did
- B. was cooking ... was doing
- C. was cooking ... did
- D. cooked ... was doing

Backgrounds need the continuous

The weather is not an event

It rained and the streets were empty. — the rain becomes an event.

It was raining and the streets were empty. — the weather behind the story.

Your turn: the flashback budget

Your turn

Which paragraph reads best?

- A. I had left my umbrella. I had walked back. The gate had been closed.
- B. I had left my umbrella. I walked back. The gate was closed.
- C. I left my umbrella. I had walked back. The gate was closed.
- D. I had been leaving my umbrella. I had been walking back.

Say it aloud

The weather: The alarm was screaming. I was dreaming about noodles.

▲
The betrayal: The noodles had betrayed me by being imaginary.

▲
The chase: I was running to the bus stop when I saw the bus leaving.

▲
The ending: The cat under the car looked at me. We understood each other.

Check yourself

- I was walking home when I saw the cat — background, then interruption.
- It was raining — weather is background, not an event.
- I had never owned a pet — the earlier scene.
- She was cooking while he was doing his homework — two backgrounds at once.