

Past continuous

English Grammar · A2

Structure (was / were + V-ing)

Past continuous

was + -ing	were + -ing
I / he / she / it	you / we / they
<i>I was cooking</i>	<i>they were playing</i>

Past continuous: reference card grid

The past continuous tense describes an action **in progress at a specific moment in the past**.

Structure: + was / were + -ing (I / he / she / it → was; you / we / they → were)

At eight I was cooking.

I was cooking at eight o'clock.

They were watching TV.

They were watching TV at that time.

Note

- Don't mix up was and were: Use **was** for I / he / she / it; use **were** for you / we / they.
- Negative: wasn't / weren't + V-ing. Question: Was / Were + subject + V-ing?

when and while

The past continuous is often used with the simple past to describe “an ongoing action interrupted by another event”.

- **while** + **past continuous** (the longer background action).
- **when** + **simple past** (the sudden, short action).

While I was sleeping, the phone rang.

The phone rang while I was sleeping.

She was cooking when I arrived.

When I arrived, she was cooking.

Compare the two tenses:

- The ongoing background action → Past continuous (was cooking).
- The short action that interrupts it → Simple past (arrived).

Note

- Two long actions happening simultaneously both use the past continuous: *While I was reading, she was writing* (I was reading, and she was writing).
- 'when' can also be followed by the past continuous, but the meaning changes. Beginners should first memorize the common collocations mentioned above.

Common Errors

- × ~~I was watch TV when he called.~~ → ✓ I was **watching** TV when he called. — After was / were, you must use the -ing form.
- × ~~They was playing games.~~ → ✓ They **were** playing games. — Use were for you / we / they.
- × ~~When I was arriving, she was cooking.~~ → ✓ **When I arrived**, she was cooking. — Arriving is a brief, instantaneous action, so use the simple past; only the longer background action uses the continuous form.
- × ~~I was knowing the answer.~~ → ✓ I **knew** the answer. — Stative verbs (know, like, want) are also generally not used in the continuous form in the past tense.