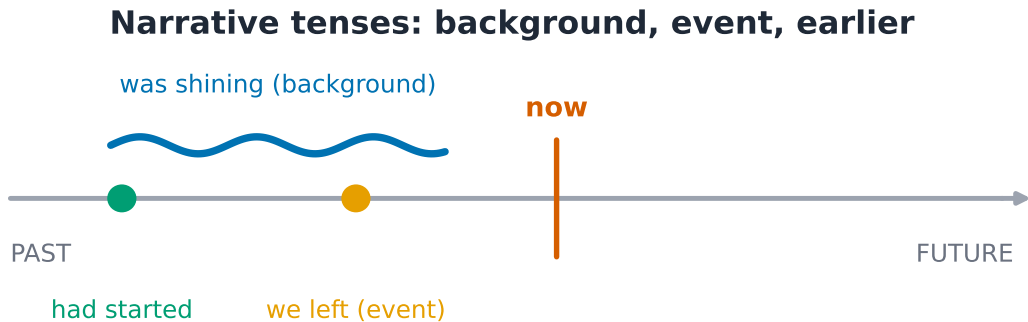


Narrative tenses

English Grammar · B2

Simple Past and Past Continuous



Narrative tenses on one timeline: past continuous background

When telling stories, English uses a set of **narrative tenses** in combination. The most basic two are:

- **Simple Past:** The **main actions** that advance the plot (one after another).
- **Past Continuous:** Setting the **background**, describing what was **happening** at that time.

The sun was shining when we left.

We set off while the sun was shining brightly. (Background + main action)

She was cooking when the phone rang.

Her phone rang while she was cooking.

Note A long background action uses the past continuous (*was cooking*); a short action interrupting it uses the simple past (*rang*).

Past Perfect for the Earlier Past

To indicate an action that occurred **before another past action**, use the **past perfect** (*had + past participle*).

When we arrived, the film had already started.

By the time we arrived, the film had already started. (Started first, arrived later)

Combination in Narrative:

- Earliest → Past Perfect (*had started*).
- Later → Simple Past (*arrived*).
- Background → Past Continuous (*was raining*).

Note These three tenses combined clearly convey the timeline of a story.

Past Perfect Continuous

The **past perfect continuous** (*had been* + *V-ing*) emphasizes an action that **continued up until** a specific point in the past.

She was tired because she had been working all day.

She was tired because she had been working all day.

Difference from Past Perfect:

- Past Perfect Continuous: Emphasizes the **continuous process / duration** (*had been working* — kept doing it).
- Past Perfect: Emphasizes **completion / result** (*had finished* — got it done).

Note Stative verbs (*know*, *be*) do not take the continuous form: use *had known*, not *~~had been knowing~~*.

Common Errors

- × *~~When the phone rang, she cooked dinner.~~* (Meaning: “was cooking”) → ✓ ...she **was cooking** dinner. — Using simple past implies she started cooking *after* the phone rang.
- × *~~While I walked home, I was meeting a friend.~~* → ✓ While I **was walking** home, I **met** a friend. — Long background actions use continuous tense; short actions use simple past. Do not reverse this.
- × *~~She had finished the report, then she had sent it.~~* → ✓ She finished the report, then sent it. — When narrating in chronological order, simple past is sufficient; past perfect is only used to look back at an earlier event.
- × *~~It was the first time I saw snow.~~* → ✓ It was the first time I **had seen** snow. — “First time” in past narration requires past perfect.