

The Past Progressive (or Continuous) Tense

We've looked at the progressive in the present already, and compared it to the simple present. In this worksheet (planned as the second of three on the progressive) we'll make the same comparisons, starting with the simple past.

The Simple Past

Normally, the **simple past is the same as the simple present, only over**. For a detailed explanation of the simple past, see the comparison of simple past and present perfect. Here, it's important to remember that the simple past simply means that an action is over. Some examples include:

- I didn't think he was a nice guy.
- My mother baked a cake.
- He ate a sandwich.
- Everyone had a really good time.

The Progressive

The progressive, in all its forms, means that an action is going on. With the present progressive (which you've already practiced) we make clear that an action is ongoing *right now*:

- He's running for President.
- We're making cookies.
- I'm not speaking German.
- They're going to Berlin.

In the next worksheet, we'll talk about using the present progressive when we talk about the future. But, for now, when you see or hear a sentence in the present progressive, you can assume you know *when* the action is ongoing, even if it's not in the sentence. **There is only one present: *right now***. There are many moments in the past, however, and just as many in the future. When we talk about the progressive in the past, we will have to make clear *which* moment we're talking about.

The Progressive in the Past

The first step to forming the progressive in the past is easy forming it. Remember that we form the continuous with 'to be,' so if you want to set the sentence in the past, all you have to do is change 'am,' 'is,' or 'are' to 'was' or 'were.' Piece of cake, right:

- I was sitting in my favorite chair at five yesterday.
- We were dancing like wild monkeys at the party last night.
- They weren't listening to you a moment ago.
- He was making a sandwich when the phone rang.

Practice: Fill in the blanks with the past continuous form of the verb in parenthesis:

1. We _____ video games last night at eight. (play)
2. They _____ on the stairs when I came home. (sit)
3. My wife _____ dinner when I called her. (cook)
4. The President _____ to Paris when it happened. (fly)

That part is easy, but **it's more complicated to understand *when* to use the continuous in the past**. Remember the two things we learned in the last worksheet about the continuous: we use it for what is happening in a moment, and for something that that is ongoing or unfinished. The same rules apply for using it in the past: we **use it for actions that were happening in a specific moment in the past, and for things that were ongoing or unfinished**.

The easiest way to start thinking about this is to think about exact times in the past.

Consider the following examples:

- I was cooking dinner at five thirty, yesterday.
- We were eating dinner at six fifteen, yesterday.
- I wasn't jogging yesterday at seven.
- Saturday at three, my brother was sunning himself in the backyard.

In each of the examples, it's easy to imagine that the actions described lasted longer than the moment listed: at five thirty, yesterday, I was *in the middle* of cooking. My brother was *in the middle of* sunning himself at three on Saturday. The first step in using the progressive in the past is to make sentences in the past with exact times.

Practice: With the subject, verb and time provided, form a complete sentence. (Remember, the time belongs at the beginning or end of the sentence.)

1. **Example** (7:00 A.M./ drive a car / he)

“At seven in the morning he was driving a car.”

2. (Yesterday at six / we / sing karaoke)
3. (This morning at five / sleep / my dog)
4. (At sunrise today / drink coffee / me)
5. (Yesterday before dinner / do yoga / my wife)
6. (Monday at 11:00A.M. / practice guitar / the G8 leaders)

So far, so good, I hope.

The problem is that, if you think about the conversations you have on a day-to-day basis, you probably don't often name exact times. The only person liable¹ to ask you questions like “What were you doing last Tuesday at seven thirty in the evening?” Is a police detective, after he's taken you in for questioning.

Does that mean that we only use the progressive when we're being interrogated² by the police? Of course not. If you look at exercises number thirty and thirty one, you'll see that **not all exact times have numbers**. It's true that I could look up when, exactly, 'sunrise today' was, but I don't have to. 'Sunrise today' is an exact time, all by itself. So is 'yesterday before dinner' and 'when I learned there is no Santa Claus.' Consider these examples:

- We were driving to my grandmothers when I got carsick.³
- I was shopping with my mom when I learned there is no Santa Claus.
- He was jogging when the dog bit him.
- They were eating when the alarm went off.

The first thing to notice about the examples above, of course, is that we use the progressive when we're talking about what happened at these 'exact times.' The second thing is to note how we describe the exact times we're talking about. We use verbs to describe the times: 'got,' learned,' 'bit,' and 'went' are all verbs. So, what're we're talking about, really, is two things happening at the same time. As a rule **we use the progressive, whenever we talk about two actions that happened at**

1 “Liable” has a number of meanings. Here, it means the same as 'likely' or 'probable.' If we say someone is “liable to be upset” that means there's a very good chance—80%, maybe?--that they will be upset.

2 “to interrogate” is a verb that means, basically, to 'question aggressively.' It's not only the police that interrogate people. Before I moved out, my parents interrogated me each morning after I got home late: “Where were you? What were you doing? Who were you with? Were their parents home?”

3 If you know what a car is, and what 'sick' means, you can imagine what 'carsick' means. It's not fun.

the same time. The longer of the two actions—the one that was 'interrupted' by the shorter action—is always in the progressive. It sounds strange in the abstract, but look at these examples:

- “I was eating dinner when you called.”
- “We were singing karaoke when I had my first vodka drink.”
- “When the car broke down⁴ I was driving to New York.”
- “They were studying for the test, when he walked in.”

Looking at these examples, you might note that the 'times' are all verbs in the simple past. 'When you called,' 'when I had. . .' 'when the car broke down.' And, in fact, you might note that none of them really qualify as 'exact times.' What's important here, is that **the longer action is in progressive and the shorter action is in simple past.**

Look at the third example: the car's break down was probably more than a momentary thing, but it was still shorter than the drive to New York. The construction we're practicing here simply says “in the middle of much much longer drive to New York, I had a break down.” I hope it's becoming clear exactly *why* the progressive can be easier to use than the alternative, once you understand it. Which would you rather say “I was in the middle of my dinner when you called me” or “I was eating dinner when you called?” The second one certainly has more of a ring to it, if you'll pardon the pun.⁵

Practice: Complete the sentences below, being careful to put the shorter action in simple past and the longer action in past progressive.

11. I _____ dinner when you _____. (eat / call)

12. We _____ when the alarm _____. (read / go off)

13. They _____ a romantic movie when they _____ for the first time. (watch / kiss)

14. My brother _____ when I _____ him last. (run / see)

4 “Break down” is a verb for when a complicated piece of machinery, or a system, stops working because one part stopped working. There has been a lot of talk in the English-language press about a 'financial system break down.'

5 “It has a ring to it” is a phrase we use sometimes in English to indicate that something sounds good and is catchy, or easy to remember. A phrase like 'Early to bed, and early to rise, makes man healthy, wealthy and wise' that sounds good and is catchy has, in English, 'a ring to it.'

15. Udo Jürgens _____ my favorite song when I _____
a dozen roses on the stage. (sing / throw)

16. My father _____ when he _____ about the World
Trade Center on September eleventh, 2001. (drive / hear)

17. He _____ TV the whole time I _____ there! (watch / be)

18. My wife _____ when her credit card _____ stolen (shop / be)

Practice: Think of the last phone call you received. What were you doing when your phone rang?
Write it as a complete sentence.

Practice: Who is the last person you visited? What were they doing when you showed up? Write
it as a complete sentence here.

Practice: With the information provided below, form complete sentences.

19. (John drove a car. At the same time, Mary sang her favorite song.)

20. (My mother talked about her problems. At the same time, I yawned.)

21. (I cried. At the same time, I looked for my lost dog.)

22. (My boss talked about customer satisfaction. At the same time, I planned my lunch.)

23. (I jogged. At the same time, I listened to my favorite song twice.)

Comparing Actions In The Past

When activities are 'nested',⁶ so that one happens within the time of the other, **the shorter activity is in the simple past and the longer activity is the progressive.** "I was watching TV when I heard the news." Piece of cake, right?

⁶ 'Nested' means they fit inside of each other, like those hollow Russian dolls.

But we don't always use the progressive to talk about activities as single actions like 'watching TV.' Instead, we sometimes use it to talk about **phases we have gone through**. Often, when I'm talking about my past, I use these 'phases' as an excuse. If someone asks me why I own a Madonna t-shirt, I shrug and say "I was listening to a lot of Madonna when I bought that shirt." That's true, even if there was no music at all in the store when I bought the t-shirt.

If this seems confusing, you might want to review the part about ongoing and unfinished actions in the first worksheet. This is the same idea, only we're moving it into the past. Some examples are:

- When I bought the CD player I was driving more than I do now.
- I was studying French when I watched Amelie.
- My family was working a lot in the garden when that photo was taken.
- You were seeing conspiracies everywhere when I moved in with you.

There's a fine line between a 'long phase' and something that someone 'generally did' in the past. It's one of the difficulties of the English 'feeling.' If you want to talk about a general rule that was true in the past, you use the simple past:

- My mom checked my homework every night when I was your age.
- You were annoying⁷ when you were seven.
- I swam every chance I got in high school.
- My brother played the tuba when I tried to study in high school. Talk about annoying!

A lot of the sentences above could be made with the progressive or the simple past and would be right either way. How do you know, then, which one to use? Sometimes neither is wrong, but one comes closer to the 'feeling' you're trying convey. Are you talking about a 'phase' or a project that was unfinished at the time you're talking about? Then use the progressive. Use the simple past when you're talking about things that were generally true in the past.

Practice: Complete the sentences with the correct form of the verbs in parenthesis.

24. We _____ a lot of pizza when we _____ that painting of a pizza. Now it seems like a strange decision. (eat / buy)

25. They _____ fancy coffee at McDonald's when I _____ there a lot. (not sell / go)

⁷ Have you ever lived with someone who played the same song over and over until you just couldn't stand hearing that song? By the time you were ready to scream, the song was 'annoying.'

26. My car _____ a strange noise when I _____ to sell it. (make / decide)

27. Who _____ your favorite singer in the ninth grade? (be)

28. When I _____ a DunkinDonuts fan, I _____ a lot of coffee. (be / drink)

Practice: Can you drive? Think about your life during the time when you just started driving. Now, with the progressive, write about the tastes you had then. (Example: “I was listening to rock and watching the Muppets on TV when I just started driving.”)

Try the same thing for your tastes when you started at your current⁸ job.

How did your mom generally treat you when you were in school? How does she treat you now?

That Darned English 'Feeling'

If you talk to many native speakers—or very advanced non-native speakers—you'll note that they don't hold to any English rules one hundred percent. So, what can you do? You can **try to let go of the rules**—and this worksheet has been seven pages of rules so far—and **think about the *feeling of the past continuous***. I've been speaking English natively for almost thirty years and what do I 'feel' when I use the continuous?

- It's more *active* or *immediate*.
- It's a 'bigger deal' than the simple past
- I use it for actions that *took a lot of time*

⁸ 'current' is another word for 'present.' Your current job is the job you have right now.

When I say 'active or immediate' I mean that the 'was doing' conveys more of a sense of action. I seldom get tired just from talking, but 'I was running for my life'⁹ conveys more of a sense of tiredness than 'I ran for my life.'

The idea of the past continuous being 'more immediate' is closely related to it being a 'bigger deal.' 'I ran for my life' sounds very monotonous, the words don't seem to fit to the urgency of the meaning. 'He drank a beer' sounds like it's just what he always did. 'He was drinking a beer' says the exact same thing, but makes it sound more unusual, more surprising. Did he promise that he'd quit? Was he at work? Was he flying an airplane? (That explains where turbulence comes from.)

Lastly, I use it for actions that take a lot of time. If I say "Yesterday I was driving to Berlin," a smart aleck¹⁰ might say that the drive from Dresden to Berlin is only two hours. So, yesterday I can't have been in the middle of the drive. That's true.

But the smart aleck doesn't know that I really don't like driving, so long before I get in the car I'm thinking—and stressing—about the drive. And long after I've arrived, I still haven't relaxed. Yesterday, the drive to Berlin dominated my day, and so I use the past progressive to exaggerate¹¹ how long the drive took.

It's important to remember that **even in these cases, you need a time with the past progressive**. And, in fact, the more exact the time, the better, because with very general times ('when I was a boy' or 'before Columbus discovered WalMart') we use the simple past. So, for the examples I've already used, I would suggest:

- I was running for my life *when I had an idea*.
- The pilot was drinking a beer *when I looked in the cockpit*.
- I was driving to Berlin *yesterday*.

Practice: The verbs in the following sentences are underlined. In the parenthesis are two times. Underline the one that matches the verb *and the context* best.

29. **EXAMPLE** I played the tuba (in high school / when my brother came home from work).

Because the 'played' is in the simple past you choose the more general time.

30. I was swimming in the river (before coming to Dresden / when the storm started).

9 'for my life' is what we say when we mean 'not to die.' Running for your life is running away from something that will kill you, it can. The same way, you can swim, paint or—I assume—even sing for your life.

10 A 'smart aleck' is one of those annoying people who always thinks that he knows something better than you do. They are, of course, an international phenomenon and there are many words for it in German. My favorite is 'Neunmalklug.'

11 'Exaggerate' is to make something seem more than it is. If I exaggerate the size of my car, I make it sound huge. But I can also exaggerate the number of people in Dresden, by saying 'Millions of people live in Dresden.' Of course, it's only half a million, I just mean it's a lot.

31. My mother was baking cookies (yesterday at six / when I was a boy).

32. I was drinking beer (yesterday evening / when I started my first job).

33. George had a huge car (when I was swimming / when gas was cheaper).

34. They were Christmas shopping (last month / when I called).

35. Who was on the phone (when you were younger / a moment ago)?

Great Job!

You made it through. At the end, I think it gets complicated. With grammar—as with love—there are rules, but we don't keep to the rules. And with grammar—as with love—I think life would be a little bit boring if we always followed the rules. But that's what makes it hard to learn. My advice? *Keep trying!* Don't be afraid to make mistakes, and try to find someone to correct you when you do make mistakes. (If nobody else you know speaks English, that's what English teachers are for.)

Have you done the exercises so far? Have you checked your answers? Great. (If you haven't, go back and do that now.) My advice to continue: wait a few days and then complete the following exercises. If you get them right, too, move on to the continuous in the future.

More Practice

In the following sentences, fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verb in parenthesis.

1. My mother _____ any alcohol last year. (not drink)

2. The weather _____ when we left. (worsen¹²)

3. The dog _____ the ball that I threw. (catch)

4. My wife's name _____ Krieger before we married. (be)

5. He _____ when you called. (eat)

¹² 'worsen' is a verb that means that something gets worse. When the economy improves, it gets better and everyone is happy. When it worsens, it gets worse and everyone worries about their jobs.

6. The airplane _____ off on time yesterday. (take)
7. He _____ when he saw the lightning. (drive)
8. Where _____ you when it happened? (be)
9. My car _____ when the error light came on. (run¹³)

The radio _____ when I came home. (blare¹⁴)

Practice: In the parenthesis, you'll find the parts of some sentences. Put the 'parts' in the correct order and match the verb to the time. They'll be either simple past or past progressive.

11. Example: (clean my car / my girlfriend and I / yesterday at six)

My girlfriend and I were cleaning my car yesterday at six.

12. (cook my favorite dinner / on my thirteenth birthday / my mother)

13. (figure out my taxes¹⁵ / my wife / all last weekend)

14. (Udo Jürgens / last night at eight / give a concert in Munich)

15. (call the President / the German Chancellor¹⁶ / last July fourth)

16. (eat dinner / the President / when the Chancellor called)

17. (when I left for work / my wife / write an email)

Practice: Now we're getting serious! Match the verbs to time in the following sentences. This time, there will be sentences in simple present, simple past, and present and past progressive!

18. Yesterday, I _____ to the doctor. (go)

13 'run' is a verb mostly associated with jogging (or something faster than jogging) but a car is 'running' when the motor is on. Even if the car isn't moving, as long as it is burning gas, it's 'running.'

14 'blare' is a verb that we mostly apply to radios and TVs: it means that they're very loud. Too loud to talk over.

15 To 'figure out taxes' is to calculate how much you have to pay, without paying too much. It's something I don't like to do, so my poor wife gets the job.

16 'Chancellor' is the English word for the person who is at the head of the German government.

19. I _____ pizza at dinner yesterday. Now I _____
some very good pasta. (eat)

20. When I came home last night, my dog _____ her tail. (wag)¹⁷

21. I _____ Udo Jürgens music! (love)

22. I'm glad to be home. At work we _____ on a new project
that seems like it will never end. (work)

Yesterday at this time my brother _____ to Berlin. (jog)

¹⁷ 'wag' is a verb that means to shake back and forth. A happy dog wags his tail.

Solutions: Here are the solutions to the exercises in the worksheet.

1. We were playing video games last night at eight.
2. They were sitting on the stairs when I came home.
3. My wife was cooking dinner when I called her.
4. The President was flying to Paris when it happened.
5. At seven in the morning he was driving a car. (This one was an example, should be easy)
6. Yesterday at six, we were singing karaoke.
7. My dog was sleeping this morning at five.
8. I was drinking coffee at sunrise today.
9. My wife was doing yoga yesterday before dinner.
10. The G8 leaders were practicing guitar Monday at 11:00 A.M.
11. I was eating dinner when you called.
12. We were reading when the alarm went off.
13. They were watching a romantic movie when they kissed for the first time.
14. My brother was running when I saw him last.
15. Udo Jürgens was singing my favorite song when I threw a dozen roses on the stage.
16. My father was driving when he heard about the World Trade Center on September 11th.
17. He was watching TV the whole time I was there! (I hate it when this happens to me.)
18. My wife was shopping when her credit card was stolen.
19. John was driving a car when Mary sang her favorite song.
20. My mother was talking about her problems when I yawned.
21. I was crying when I looked for my lost dog.
22. I planned my lunch while my boss was talking about customer satisfaction.
23. I listened to my favorite song twice when I was jogging.
24. We were eating a lot of pizza when we bought that painting of a pizza. Now it seems like a strange decision.
25. They weren't selling fancy coffee at McDonald's when I went there a lot.
26. My car was making a strange noise when I decided to sell it.
27. Who was your favorite singer in the ninth grade?
28. When I was a DunkinDonuts fan, I was drinking a lot of coffee.
29. I played the tuba in high school. (This is also an example. Hard to get wrong.)
30. I was swimming in the river when the storm started.
31. My mother was baking cookies yesterday at six. (Because 'when I was a small boy' is too general.)

32. I was drinking beer yesterday evening. (Because 'when I started my first job' doesn't fit!)
33. George had a huge car when gas was cheaper. (Actually, both fit here. But, since I probably wasn't swimming longer than George had his car—and that would be the meaning, because the shorter action is always in simple past—the general time of 'when gas was cheaper' makes more sense.)
34. They were Christmas shopping when I called.
35. Who was on the phone a moment ago?

More Solutions! Here are the solutions to the exercises that came after the worksheet.

1. My mother didn't drink any alcohol last year. (She really didn't. My mom is cool.)
2. The weather was worsening when we left.
3. The dog caught the ball that I threw. (Because 'that I threw' is in simple past, but it's not a time, it's a description!)
4. My wife's name was Krieger before we married.
5. He was eating when you called.
6. The airplane took off on time yesterday.
7. He was driving when he saw the lightning.
8. Where were you when it happened? (Tricky, but we don't normally use 'be' in the progressive. You knew that, right?)
9. My car was running when the error light came on.
10. The radio was blaring when I came home.
11. My girlfriend and I were cleaning my car yesterday at six. (Again, an example.)
12. My mother cooked my favorite dinner on my thirteenth birthday.
13. My wife was figuring out my taxes all last weekend. (The 'all last weekend' suggests that she spent most of the last weekend on the task. That's why I chose the past progressive.)
14. Udo Jürgens was giving a concert in Munich last night at eight. (Interestingly, this suggests he was in the middle of the concert. You could also write “Udo Jürgens gave a concert. . . at eight” and the meaning would be different. With the simple past, it means that the concert started at eight.
15. The German Chancellor called the President last July fourth.
16. The President was eating dinner when the Chancellor called.
17. When I left for work, my wife was writing an email.
18. Yesterday I went to the doctor.
19. I ate pizza at dinner yesterday. Now I'm eating some very good pasta.

20. When I came home last night, my dog was wagging her tail.
21. I love Udo Jürgens music.
22. I'm glad to be home. At work we are working on a new project that seems like it will never end.
23. Yesterday at this time my brother was jogging to Berlin.