

Unit 12

Past continuous (I was doing)

a Study this example situation:



Yesterday Tom and Jim played tennis. They began at 10 o'clock and finished at 11 o'clock.

What **were they doing** at 10.30?
They **were playing** tennis (at 10.30).

'They **were playing**' means that they were in the middle of playing tennis. They had started playing but they hadn't finished.

This is the *past continuous* tense:

I/he/she **was** || **playing**

We use the past continuous to say that someone was in the middle of doing something at a certain time. The action or situation had already started before this time but hadn't finished:

- This time last year I **was living** in Brazil.
- What **were you doing** at 10 o'clock last night?

b The past continuous does not tell us whether an action was finished or not. Perhaps it was finished, perhaps not. Compare:

- Tom **was cooking** the dinner. (*past continuous*) = He was in the middle of cooking the dinner and we don't know whether he finished cooking it.
- Tom **cooked** the dinner. (*past simple*) = He began and finished it.
- Tom **burnt** his hand when he **was cooking** the dinner.
- I **saw** Jim in the park. He **was sitting** on the grass and **reading** a book.
- It **was raining** when I **got** up.
- While I **was working** in the garden, I **hurt** my back.

But to say that one thing happened *after* another, use the past simple:

- Yesterday evening Tom was having a bath when the phone rang. He **got** out of the bath and **answered** the phone.

Compare:

- When Tom arrived, we **were having** dinner. (*past continuous*) = We had already started dinner before Tom arrived.
- When Tom arrived, we **had** dinner. (*past simple*) = Tom arrived and then we had dinner.

Note: There are some verbs (for example **know**) which are not normally used in continuous tenses. For a list of these verbs see **Unit 3b**.

- Tom **was cooking** the dinner. (*past continuous*) = He was in the middle of