

DESCRIBING PAST EVENTS

Narrative: 1. Main events

The past simple is used to describe **finished events** in the past, one thing happening after another.

*Susan **went** into the station and **bought** a ticket.*

2. Background description

The past continuous is used to describe **actions still in progress** (when we were in the middle of doing st.), and is used for **background description** (*while, when, just as*). *Just as I **was leaving** the house, the phone rang.*

*There were a lot of people waiting in the station. Some **were sleeping** on the benches, and others **were walking** up and down. Sarah **was looking for** Graham so she didn't sit down.*

3. Past before past

The past perfect is used to describe a past event which took place before another past event. Past simple (*arrived*) is the **starting point** of the story.

*By the time the train arrived, Susan **had managed** to push her way to the front of the crowd.*

(Note: **Had done** is the past of **have done**)

*Who is that woman? I've **never seen** her before.*

*I didn't know who she was. I'd **never seen** her before)*

It is not always necessary if a **time expression** makes the order of events clear.

***Before** the train arrived, Susan **managed** to push her way to the front of the crowd.*

WATCH OUT!

The patient **died**. The doctor **arrived**.

The patient **died** when the doctor **arrived**.

The patient **had died** when the doctor **arrived**.

The doctor **arrived** quickly, but the patient **had already died**.

Past perfect continuous is used to describe a **period of time** before something else happened.

*At last the bus came. I **had been waiting** for twenty minutes.*

*It wasn't raining when we went out. The sun was shining. But it **had been raining**, so the ground was wet.*

4. Interrupted past continuous

We often contrast an action still in progress with a sudden event which interrupts it.

*While Susan **was trying** to get onto the platform, a man **grabbed** her handbag.*

5. Participle clauses

are introduced by the time expressions *before*, *after* and *while*. They have **the same subject** as the following clause.

***After struggling** with him, **Susan pulled** the bag from his hands.*

Habits in the past:

1. Past simple

is used to describe **past habits or states**. A time expression is usually necessary.

*I always **got up** at six those days. (HABIT)*

*I **lived** in Australia for several years. (STATE)*

2. Used to

is used to describe **past habits**, usually in contrast with the present. A time expression is NOT necessary.

*I **used to get up** at six, but now I get up at eight.*

Used to can also describe past states.

*I **used to own** a horse.* (I owned a horse once.)

Note these forms of *used to*: I **didn't use to** like beer.

***Did you use to** swim every day?*

3. Would

is used to describe a person's **typical activities** in the past. It can only be used to describe **repeated actions**, and is mainly used in writing, and **in personal reminiscences**.

*Every evening was the same. Jack **would turn on the radio, light his pipe and fall asleep.***

4. Past continuous

can be used to describe a repeated action in the past, often an **annoying habit**. A frequency adverb is necessary.

*When Peter was younger, he **was always lying.***

Politeness and uncertainty

The **past continuous** with the verb *wonder* has a **polite meaning**.

*I **was wondering** if you could help me.*

With the verb *think* it suggests **uncertainty**.

*I **was thinking** of having a party next week.*