

Simple past and past continuous

The simple past and the past continuous are two tenses commonly used to make general statements about the past. Although they are both past tenses their uses are quite different.

The simple past tense is only used to say that something happened at some time in the past.

I went to a Chinese restaurant yesterday.

She called me in the morning.

He went to the market.

I flew to Sydney last month.

I visited my sister during my trip to Australia.

As you can see all of these sentences are about finished events in the past. The simple past tense is commonly used with past time adverbs like yesterday, last week, last year etc.

The past continuous tense

The past continuous tense is mainly used to talk about past events that were in progress at a particular point of time in the past.

I was reading at 6 yesterday evening.

She was getting ready for school at 9.30 yesterday morning.

This tense form is also used to talk about events happening at the same time that something important happened in the past. Note that we use the simple past to denote the action that happened in the middle of the longer action denoted by the past continuous tense.

She was having a bath when the telephone rang. (Here we use the past continuous tense to refer to the longer background action and the simple past tense to refer to the shorter action that happened in the middle.)

They were playing cards when someone knocked at the door.

She was having lunch when visitors arrived.

When we are talking about two longer actions that were in progress at the same time, we use the past continuous tense in both clauses.

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Alice was cooking dinner when Jack was playing cards.