

Adapted from: Elementary Language Practice by Michael Vince

Explanations

We often contrast a continuing situation with a sudden event.

Statements

I was writing a letter when Paul phoned.
(continuing situation) (sudden event)

6.20pm 7pm 7.30pm 8pm 8.30pm

writing a letter *telephone rang* *Now*

I started the letter at 7.00.

Paul phoned at 8.00.

I was writing a letter when Paul phoned.

While I was writing a letter, Paul phoned.

While I was waiting for the bus, I saw the accident.

(continuing situation) (sudden event)

10 am

11 am

waiting

saw accident

I started waiting for the bus at 10.00.

I saw the accident at 10.30.

I saw the accident when I was waiting for the bus.

I saw the accident while I was waiting for the bus.

I was waiting for the bus when I saw the accident.

When I saw the accident, I was waiting for the bus.

Questions

What were you doing when I phoned?

I was writing a letter when you phoned.

When did you see the accident?

I saw the accident while I was waiting for the bus.

- You can use *when* with both past simple and continuous, but *while* is only used with the continuous.