

# Past time

Adapted from "First Certificate Language Practice" by Michael Vince

## Explanations - Describing events in the past

- **Main events**

The past simple is used to describe finished actions and events in the past.

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

- **Background description**

The past continuous is used to describe actions in progress in the past. It gives information about the background situation.

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

- **Past before past**

The past perfect is used to make it clear that one past event happens before another past event. We use the past perfect for the earlier event.

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

It is not always necessary to use the past perfect 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.*

- **Past continuous used with past simple**

We often use the past continuous first to set the scene, and then the past simple for the separate, completed actions that happen.

*Susan **was looking for** Graham, so she **didn't sit down**. Instead, she **tried** calling him on her mobile phone.*

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

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

- **Participle clauses**

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

- **Past simple**

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

*I always **got up** at six in those days, (habit)  
I **lived** in Austria for several years. (state)*

- **Used to**

*Used to* is used to describe past habits or states. A time expression is not necessary.

*I **used to get up** at six, but now I **get up** at eight. I **used to own** a horse. (I owned a horse once.)*

With negatives and questions *used to* becomes *use to*.

*I **didn't use to** like beer.*

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

When we use *used to* we suggest that the action is no longer true and so make a strong contrast with the present.

- **Would**

*Would* is used to describe a person's typical activities in the past. It can only be used to describe repeated actions, not states. It 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.*

- **Past continuous**

The 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 getting** into trouble.*

### **Politeness and uncertainty**

We can use the past continuous with *think*, *hope* and *wonder* to give a polite or uncertain meaning.

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

*I **was hoping** you would join us at the cafe tonight.*

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

- Key points**
- 1 The past simple describes completed events in the past, such as the main events in a narrative. It can also describe habits and routines in the past.
  - 2 The past continuous is used for:
    - a) background description.
    - b) actions in progress, often contrasted with a sudden event.The past continuous cannot be used to describe past routines and habits.
  - 3 Participle clauses can introduce a clause giving the main event. The subjects of both clauses must be the same.
  - 4 The past perfect describes a past event which took place before another past event. If *before* or *after* is used, the past perfect is optional. The past perfect is not used for an event that happened a long time ago in the past.
  - 5 *Used to* only refers to past time, and has no present form.
  - 6 *Would* can be used to describe habitual actions in the past, usually in writing. *Would* does not make such a strong contrast with the present as *used to*. Compare:

*Jim would always make his mother a cup of tea after lunch.*

*Jim used to drink tea, but now he prefers coffee. Would cannot be used to describe states.*

*Sally used to be a dancer.*