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**Form**

The past continuous tense is formed by the past tense of the verb **to be** + the present participle:

**Affirmative Negative Interrogative**

I was working I was not working was I working?

you were working you were not working Were you working?

he/she/it was working he/she/it was not working was he/she/it working?

we were working we were not working were we working?

you were working you were not working were you working?

they were working they were not working were they working

Negative contractions: *I wasn't working, you weren't working* etc.

Negative interrogative: *was he not/wasn't he working?* etc.

Remember that some verbs cannot be used in the continuous tenses.

**Main uses of the past continuous tense**

A The past continuous is chiefly used for past actions which continued for some time but whose exact limits are not known and are not important. It might be expressed diagrammatically. '……’ indicates uncertainty about times of starting or finishing:

B Used without a time expression it can indicate gradual development:

*It was getting darker. The wind was rising.*

C Used with a point in time, it expresses an action which began before that time and probably continued after it.

*At eight he was having breakfast* implies that he was in the middle of breakfast at eight, i.e. that he had started it before eight.

He had breakfast at eight would imply that he started it at eight.

If we replace the time expression with a verb in the simple past tense:

*When I* ***arrived****,* Tom **was talking** on the phone**.**

**Other uses of the past continuous**

This tense can be used as a past equivalent of the present continuous:

A Direct speech: *He said, 'I am living in London.'*

Indirect speech: *He said he was living in London.*

B Just as the present continuous can be used to express a definite future arrangement:

*I'm leaving tonight. I've got my plane ticket.*

so the past continuous can express this sort of future in the past:

*He was busy packing, for he was leaving that night.* (The decision to leave had been made some time previously.)

C The past continuous with always:

*He was always ringing me up. He was always working.*

(See for present continuous with always.)

**Past continuous as an alternative to the simple past**

The past continuous can be used as an alternative to the simple past to indicate a more casual, less deliberate action:

*I was talking to Tom the other day.*

The past continuous here gives the impression that the action was in no way unusual or remarkable. It also tends to remove responsibility from the subject. In the above example it is not clear who started the conversation, and it does not matter. Note the contrast with the simple past tense, *I talked to Tom*, which indicates that I took the initiative.

Similarly:

*From four to six Tom was washing the car.*

This would indicate that this was a casual, possibly routine action. Compare with:

*From four to six Tom washed the car.* (implying a deliberate action by Tom)

Note that continuous tenses are used only for apparently continuous uninterrupted actions. If we divide the action up, or say how many times it happened, we must use the simple past:

*I talked to Tom several times. Tom washed both cars.*

But we may, of course, use the continuous for apparently parallel actions:

*Between one and two I was doing the shopping and walking the dog.*