

Grammar Past Tenses

We use four different tenses in English to talk about things which have happened in the past. They are:

- Past simple (sometimes referred to as preterite)
 - Past perfect (sometimes referred to as pluperfect)
 - Past continuous (sometimes referred to as past progressive)
 - Past perfect continuous (sometimes referred to as past perfect progressive)
-

Past Simple

The past simple tense is used to state something that occurred in the past. It's formed using the simple past tense of the verb.

e.g.

She **walked** to the shop.

We use the past simple when we describe *when* something happened.

e.g.

She walked to the shop **the other day**.

She walked to the shop **when she got the phone call**.

She **often** walked to the shop.

Can you put the following sentences into the past simple tense?

1. We see the fireworks burst in the sky like flowers.

2. The crowd cheer when the band come on.

3. The teacher writes the names on the board.

4. Slowly, the clouds form on the horizon.

5. With a scream of fury, she throws the book at the door.

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Past Perfect

The past perfect is used to state something which occurred before a particular point in the past. It's formed using "had" plus the past participle of the verb (the verb in its past form).

e.g.

*She **had walked** to the shop.*

We use the past perfect to allow us to be more specific about when something happened.

e.g.

*She had walked to the shop **after the post arrived**.*

We also use the past perfect if we are talking about something conditional and its result.

e.g.

***If** she had walked to the shop, **then** we would have had chips for tea.*

Can you put the following sentences into the past perfect tense?

1. We see the fireworks burst in the sky like flowers.

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Past Continuous

The past continuous is used to state something which was continuing to occur in the past. It's formed by using the past tense of the verb "to be" with a present participle (an -ing word).

e.g.

*She **was walking** to the shop.*

We can use the past continuous with other past tenses within a sentence, to show interrupted action.

e.g.

***She was walking** to the shop when **he called**.*

We also use the past continuous to describe things which happened all the time.

e.g.

***She was walking** to the shop every day by the time she was nine.*

Can you put the following sentences into the past perfect tense?

1. We see the fireworks burst in the sky like flowers.

2. The crowd cheer when the band come on.

3. The teacher writes the names on the board.

4. Slowly, the clouds form on the horizon.

5. With a scream of fury, she throws the book at the door.

Look over the sentences you have written. Do they all sound right? The past continuous tense is not the right choice for all of them. Can you identify why?

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Past Perfect Continuous

The past perfect continuous is used to state something which was continuing to occur in the past and then ended in the past. It's formed by using "had been" with a present participle (an -ing word).

e.g.

*She **had been walking** to the shop.*

We often use the past perfect continuous to describe how something was happening in the past until another action happened.

e.g.

***She had been walking** to the shop when she heard the news.*

Can you put the following sentences into the past perfect tense?

1. We see the fireworks burst in the sky like flowers.

2. The crowd cheer when the band come on.

3. The teacher writes the names on the board.

4. Slowly, the clouds form on the horizon.

5. With a scream of fury, she throws the book at the door.

Look over the sentences you have written. Do they all sound right? The past perfect continuous tense is not the right choice for all of them. Can you identify why?

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Tense Mix

Can you put the following verbs into the different past tenses? The first one has been completed for you.

	Past simple	Past perfect	Past continuous	Past perfect continuous
I say	<i>I said</i>	<i>I had said</i>	<i>I was saying</i>	<i>I had been saying</i>
They run				
She notes				
We argue				
You forget				

Now, choose five of the above verb tenses to create your own sentences:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

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Spot The Mistakes!

Are the following sentences correct? Give them a tick or a cross. For those that are incorrect, put them into the form of the past tense that you think works best.

1. He was sat on the bench beside the gym.
2. She was looking for the book when the lights went out.
3. Slowly, the feather falled to the ground.
4. The car had goed slowly along the wet road.
5. I had been waiting for ten minutes when he arrived.
6. They singed the song but they were out of tune.
7. They had laid next to each other on the ground.
8. He shouted a warning as the train hurtled past.
9. They had followed the path but got lost when they reached the wood.
10. The sword rised from the lake, gleaming in the white hand.

Answers

Past simple

1. We **saw** the fireworks burst in the sky like flowers.
 2. The crowd **cheered** when the band **came** on.
 3. The teacher **wrote** the names on the board.
 4. Slowly, the clouds **formed** on the horizon.
 5. With a scream of fury, she **threw** the book at the door.
-

Past perfect

1. We **had seen** the fireworks **had burst** in the sky like flowers.
 2. The crowd **had cheered** when the band **had come** on.
 3. The teacher **had written** the names on the board.
 4. Slowly, the clouds **had formed** on the horizon.
 5. With a scream of fury, she **had thrown** the book at the door.
-

Past Continuous

1. We **were seeing** the fireworks **were bursting** in the sky like flowers.
(This second verb works better in the past simple tense, as “burst” is a single, rather than continuous, action.)
 2. The crowd **was cheering** when the band **was coming** on.
(This second verb works better in the past simple tense, as “came on” is a single, rather than continuous, action.)
 3. The teacher **was writing** the names on the board.
 4. Slowly, the clouds **were forming** on the horizon.
 5. With a scream of fury, she **was throwing** the book at the door.
(This verb doesn’t suit the continuous tense as the action is a single event, rather than continuous.)
-

Past perfect continuous

1. We **had been seeing** the fireworks burst in the sky like flowers.
2. The crowd **had been cheering** when the band **had been coming** on.
(This second verb works better in the past simple tense, as “came on” is a single, rather than continuous, action.)
3. The teacher **had been writing** the names on the board.
4. Slowly, the clouds **had been forming** on the horizon.
5. With a scream of fury, she **had been throwing** the book at the door.
(This verb doesn’t suit the continuous tense as the action is a single event, rather than continuous.)

Answers**Tense Mix**

	Past simple	Past perfect	Past continuous	Past perfect continuous
I say	<i>I said</i>	<i>I had said</i>	<i>I was saying</i>	<i>I had been saying</i>
They run	They ran	They had run	They were running	They had been running
She notes	She noted	She had noted	She was noting	She had been noting
We argue	We argued	We had argued	We were arguing	We had been arguing
You forget	We forgot	We had forgotten	We were forgetting	We had been forgetting

Spot The Mistakes!

1. He was sat on the bench beside the gym. **X**
He sat on the bench beside the gym.
He had sat on the bench beside the gym.
He was sitting on the bench beside the gym.
He had been sitting on the bench beside the gym.
2. She was looking for the book when the lights went out. **✓**
3. Slowly, the feather falled to the ground. **X**
Slowly, the feather fell to the ground.
Slowly, the feather had fallen to the ground.
Slowly, the feather was falling to the ground.
Slowly, the feather had been falling to the ground.
4. The car had goed slowly along the wet road. **X**
The car went slowly along the wet road.
The car had gone slowly along the wet road.
The car was going slowly along the wet road.
The car had been going slowly along the wet road.
5. I had been waiting for ten minutes when he arrived. **✓**
6. They singed the song but they were out of tune. **X**
They sang the song but they were out of tune.
They had sung the song but they were out of tune.
They were singing the song but they were out of tune.
They had been singing the song but they were (or had been) out of tune.

Answers

7. They had laid next to each other on the ground. **X**
They lay next to each other on the ground.
They had lain next to each other on the ground.
They were lying next to each other on the ground.
They had been lying next to each other on the ground.
8. He shouted a warning as the train hurtled past. ✓
9. They had followed the path but got lost when they reached the wood. ✓
10. The sword rised from the lake, gleaming in the white hand. **X**
The sword rose from the lake, gleaming in the white hand.
The sword had risen from the lake, gleaming in the white hand.
The sword was rising from the lake, gleaming in the white hand.
The sword had been rising from the lake, gleaming in the white hand.