

Past Simple, Past Continuous or Past Perfect Simple?

1. The simple past tense

The simple past tense is used for three main types of action:

	Completed action in the past.
	Interrupted action in the past.
	Describe how things were in the past.

Some examples will help to make this clearer:

Type of action	Examples	Explanations
Completed	I went to Brazil last month.	Last month indicates that the action is finished.
Interrupted	When he opened the door, the phone rang.	Here we find a series of completed actions together.
Description	In the 19 th century, women didn't wear bikinis.	It describes a completed action in the past.

2. The past continuous tense

The past continuous tense is used mainly for incomplete actions in the past. It does not tell us whether an action was finished or not.

	An incomplete action in progress at a specific time in the past.
	An incomplete action interrupted by another action.
	Two incomplete actions in progress at the same time in the past.

Here are some examples:

Type of action	Examples	Explanations
An incomplete action in progress at a specific time in the past.	At 10 o'clock yesterday, I was watching TV.	It shows the time when an action was taking place.
An incomplete action interrupted by another action.	They were having dinner when Peter arrived home.	'were having' is a longer action than 'arrived'.
Two incomplete actions in progress at the same time in the past.	I was reading a book while my sister was listening to the radio.	Both actions were happening at the same time in the past and they emphasize that the activities were in progress.

3. The past perfect simple tense

The past perfect simple tense is used mainly to indicate that an action happened before another action in the past.

A completed action which took place before another action in the past.

Here are some examples:

Type of action	Examples	Explanations
An action taking place before a certain time in the past.	Before I came here, I had phoned my mother.	'had phoned' puts emphasis only on the fact, not the duration.
	By the time he arrived, the train had already left.	'had left' shows that this action happened before 'he arrived'