

66 Past continuous

AN UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECT

*'I **was going** home from the pub at quarter to eleven. There was a full moon. I **was walking** over the bridge when I saw the UFO. It was quite low. It was long and thin, shaped like a cigar. It appeared to be made of aluminium. It **was travelling** east to west, towards Warminster. I didn't know what to do. I didn't have a camera of course. I watched it for a minute and then it went behind a cloud.'*

1 Form

Past of *be* + active participle

*I/he/she/it **was flying***

*you/we/they **were flying***

Negative

*I/he/she/it **was not flying***

*you/we/they **were not flying***

Questions

***was** I/he/she/it flying?*

***were** you/we/they flying?*

2 Use

a An action over a past period

We use the past continuous for an action over a period of past time, something that we were in the middle of.

*At quarter to eleven I **was walking** home.*

*The UFO **was travelling** east to west.*

***I wasn't sleeping**, so I got up.*

*I looked into the room. All the old people **were watching** television.*

Compare the present continuous and past continuous.

*The UFO **is travelling** west. (It is in the middle of its journey.)*

*The UFO **was travelling** west. (It **was** in the middle of its journey.)*

But for a complete action in the past, we use the past simple.

*The UFO **went** behind a cloud.*

In these examples the past continuous means an action over a whole period.

*The salesman **was travelling** from Monday to Friday.*

*We **were watching** for UFOs all night. We never went to sleep.*

Here we could also use the past simple.

Period of time: *He **was travelling** all week. He was very tired.*

Complete action: *He **travelled** all week. He drove a long way.*

b Past continuous and past simple

The period of a past continuous action can include a clock time.

*I **was walking** home **at quarter to eleven**.*

It can also include another action.

*I **was walking** home **when I saw** the UFO.*

Here the speaker sees one action as happening around another. The past continuous is the longer, background action (*walking*), and the past simple is the shorter, complete action (*saw*). The shorter action interrupted the longer one.

Here are some more examples.

*Tim **was washing** his hair when the doorbell **rang**.*

*I **had** a sudden idea when/while/as I **was waiting** in a traffic queue.*

*The sun **was shining** when the campers **woke**.*

When two actions both went on during the same period of time, we use the past continuous for both.

*Tim **was washing** his hair while I **was cleaning** up the kitchen.*

When one complete action followed another, we use the past simple for both.

*Tim **got up** when the doorbell **rang**. (= The doorbell rang and then Tim got up.)*

c Past states

For a past state we normally use the past simple.

*My grandmother **loved** this house.*

*I **didn't know** what to do.*

*The UFO **appeared** to be made of aluminium. It **had** a shape like a cigar.*

NOTE

With temporary states we can sometimes use the past continuous. For details, • 62.

*I **didn't feel**/wasn't feeling very well.*

Other uses of the past continuous

- a We can use the past continuous for repeated actions which are temporary, only for a period.

*My car was off the road. I **was travelling** to work by bus that week.*

Compare *I'm **travelling** to work by bus this week.* • 64(2c)

- b We can use the past continuous for a past arrangement.

*I was on my way to the pub. I **was meeting** James there.*

(= I had arranged to meet James there.)

For *I'm **meeting** James at the pub tonight,* • 73(1).

- c With the continuous, *always* means 'very often' or 'too often'.

*Do you remember Mr Adams? He **was always quoting** Shakespeare.*

For examples with the present continuous, • 64(2d).