

UNIT 1

TALKING ABOUT THE PAST

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YOUR CHALLENGE IN THIS UNIT

There are many ways of talking about the past in English. In this unit, you will review the main grammar rules that determine when to use the simple past and the past continuous.

But this is not just about grammar rules, so we'll also see how to use these tenses to emphasize different parts of our speech using one rather than the other.

Further than that, you'll also study how to speculate about the past and how to talk about the future in the past.

1. PAST EVENTS AND SITUATIONS

When we talk about past events and situations, we must consider the context of the event or condition we are talking about to use the proper past tense.

Let's see each one of the options that we have and when to use each one of them.

1.1. SIMPLE PAST

The simple past tense is used to describe:

- An action that started and finished at a specific time in the past. It is not necessary to mention the particular time, but it is implied in the verb form.
 - Yesterday I **felt** so tired that I didn't go to work
 - He **won** his first Grand Slam singles title in 2008 at the age of 20.
- An action that lasted for a period of time in the past, but now is finished.
 - I **studied** in Paris for four years from 2005 to 2009
 - I **spoke** to him on the phone for half an hour.
- Events which occurred regularly or habitually in the past.
 - Every Spring, Grant **visited** his elderly aunts in Maine
 - He **worked** at a restaurant when he **was** at university
- Actions which happened one after the other
 - She **opened** the fridge, **took out** the milk, **gave** some to the cat, and **put** some in her coffee
 - I **finished** work at five, **went** to my favourite café, and **spent** an hour just watching the world go by.

Sometimes when talking about the past, we want to emphasize contrast, a feeling or an action. To do so, we use what is called “**past emphatic**” tense, which is formed by adding the basic present form of the verb to the past tense of the verb To Do.

- I **did enjoy** our visit to the Science Museum last summer
- Perhaps our grandparents didn't have e-mail, but they **did have** the telephone and telegrams

Now that you know when you must use the past simple, let's check how to spell this tense using the following rules (remember that these rules apply only to regular verbs):

Ending	Rule	Examples	
Consonant after a stressed vowel	Double the consonant	Stop Ban	Stopped Banned
Consonant after a not stressed vowel	Don't double the consonant	Open Offer	Opened Offered
Vowel + Y	Take /-ed/	Play	Played
Consonant + Y	Y becomes I + /-ed/	Study	Studied
Silent E	Take /-d/	Live	Lived

Important: In British English, we double the last “L” of words like Travel, Cancel, Marvel, and Level even though the last vowel is not stressed.

If you want to review the list of irregular verbs to check their simple past and past participle forms, take a look at these links:

- <http://www.learnenglishirregularverbs.com/study/list-of-english-irregular-verbs>
- https://www.perfect-english-grammar.com/support-files/all_irregular_verbs_list.pdf

1.2. PAST CONTINUOUS

The past continuous tense is used to describe:

- An activity which started before and continued until an event in the past:
 - She **was driving** home when the police stopped her
 - He **was playing** rugby when he broke his leg
- An activity which started before and continued after an event in the past:

- I **was cooking** lunch when I heard the news (and I continued to cook afterwards)
- While Kevin **was** away **visiting** friends in Italy, his flat was burgled.
- A situation which was temporary at a time in the past:
 - I remember that summer well. I **was staying** with my aunt at the time, while my parents were away.

Compare the use of the past simple when the situation on the past was more permanent: "I lived in Rome when I was a child" (not I was living)
- Something that frequently happened, with "always" or "forever", often to express amusement or irritation:
 - My dad **was always dressing up** in funny hats
 - We got fed up with Jill, who **was forever complaining**.

However, when a verb describes a state and not an action (what in English is called "State verbs") we don't use the continuous tense. States verbs are commonly:

- Verbs which express opinions, feeling or knowledge, like: agree, believe, disagree, hate, know, like, love, need, prefer, realise, regret and understand.
- Verbs which describe the appearance, like: appear, look, seem and resemble.
- Verbs which describe senses, like: smell and taste.
- Other verbs like: belong, consist, contain, cost and own.

Now that you know when you must use the past continuous let's check how to spell this tense using the following rules:

Ending	Rule	Examples	
One syllable verbs ending with consonant + vowel + consonant	Double the last consonant before /-ing/	Run Sit	Running Sitting
Two or more syllable verbs ending with consonant + vowel + consonant	Double the last consonant in the last syllable is stressed and add /-ing/	Commit Whisper	Committing Whispering
- IC	Add K before /-ing/	Panic	Panicking
- L	Double L before /-ing/	Travel	Travelling
Silent E	Drop the -e and add /-ing/	Dance	Dancing
- IE	Change IE to Y and add /-ing/	Die	Dying

1.3. PAST SIMPLE VS PAST CONTINUOUS

Sometimes the differences between past simple and past continuous are not so clear, and we can even use both in the same sentence with little nuances in the meaning. Let's see the main cases.

- When we talk about events or activities that went on over the same period of past time, we can often use the past continuous or the past simple for both:

- Mia **was playing** with the children while Ben **was cleaning** up the kitchen or Mia **played** with the children while Ben **cleaned** up the kitchen

Using the past continuous emphasises that the event or activity was in progress during the past period of time. Compare:

- When I **was learning /learned** to drive I was living with my parents

In this case, **Was learning** emphasises that the activity was in progress (I had lessons during this period) and **learned** emphasises completion (I passed my test during this time)

- As we have just seen, we usually use the past simple rather than the past continuous to talk about repeated past actions:

- I **went** to the gym three times last week
- **Did** you **drive** past her house every day?

However, we can use the past continuous, particularly in spoken English, when we want to emphasise that repeated actions went on for a limited and temporary period of past time.

- When she was in hospital, we **were visiting** her twice a day (or.... We visited her....)

Also, to talk about something that happened surprisingly often:

- Last week I **was having** to bring work home every night (or ... I had to...)

- We can use either the past continuous or past simple with some verbs to talk about things we intended to do but didn't.

- We **were meaning** to call in and see you, but I wasn't feeling well or We **meant** to call in and see you, but I wasn't feeling well.

The main verbs used in these cases are: Consider + ing, Expect to, Hope to, Intend to, Plan to /on + ing, Think about /of + ing, and Want to.

1.4. WOULD AND USED TO

Would + infinitive and Used to + infinitive are also used to talk about the past, specifically to talk about regularly or habitually things in the past but don't happen now.

- When I was small my mom **would read** to me in bed.
- While she was reading to me, my father **used to wash up** the dinner things

Here are some tips for using these structures correctly:

- Use **used to** and not **would to** to talk about past states which no longer exist (usually with verbs such as **be**, **have**, and **live**).
 - There **used to** be a grocer's opposite the bus station
 - This **used to** be a quiet neighbourhood
- **Used to** only exist in the past. It has no other tenses. The negative form is **Didn't use to** and the question form is **Did + subject + use to**.
 - He **didn't use to** be short-tempered
 - **Did** you **use to** enjoy school when you were a child?
- **Used to** can't refer to specific restricted periods in the past or to single actions in the past. Instead, we should use the simple past.
 - In September 1991, I **lived** (not **used to**) in Paris
 - In 1992 I **moved** (not **used to**) from London to Nottingham

2. THE FUTURE IN THE PAST

Usually, we talk about the past tense, the present tense, and the future tense, but there is also the possibility to talk about the future in the past. What is this? Well, the future in the past is used to express the idea that in the past, you thought something would happen in the future.

Future in the past in English has different forms:

- **Would** – This form suggests an expectation or a possibility, and also a plan. When it refers to a possibility or an intention, it is often paired with verbs relating to the subject's thoughts (think, suspect, know, hope) in the simple past.
 - She said she **would help** me with the report
 - I thought I **would be able** to go to the meeting

But the Would form of the future in the past can also be used to introduce something that is currently true

 - I thought I **would get** a pay rise, and I did!
 - I always thought I **would live** in Paris
- **Was going to** – This form is used to describe a future plan or intention relative to the time of speaking. This form is often used when the anticipated event did not actually happen, but we can also use it even if it did happen.
 - I **was going** for a run today, but finally, I didn't. I was too tired
 - I had a feeling that the vacation **was going** to be a disaster. And it was.
- **Past continuous** – We use this form to talk about arrangements in the past (no matter if they finally happened or not)
 - I was in a hurry because I **was meeting** Harry at 13 o'clock
 - They **were coming** to the party, but they had an accident

Future in the past is frequently used to introduce apologies, especially the Would and the Was going to forms. They can be used to introduce an excuse or explain why a situation did not unfold as planned.

- I'm sorry, I **was going to** prepare the documents today but I completely forgot about it
- Accept my sincere apologies. I thought the order **would be** completed by now but there has been a delay at the factory.

3. PRESENT AND FUTURE EVENTS AND SITUATIONS

We have seen how to use past tenses to talk about things or actions always in the past. But in fact, we also can use this tense to talk about things that are not in the past but to talk about actions or states in the present and even in the future.

Let's see in which situations we use past verb forms to talk about present or future:

- We can use past simple to talk about an action that has not been done yet, but it should. The past simple here shows that it is really urgent to do that action we are talking about. It is frequently used after the construction "It's time."
- It's time we **left**
 - Kids, **isn't it time** you **went** to bed?
- We can also use the past simple to talk about things that are not real in the present or in the future, usually afterwards like wish and If only.
- I **wish** I **had** more time!
 - **If only** you **were** here!

***Remember:** in these cases, it is usual to use the plural form of the verb to be with I and He/She/It. For example: I wish he **were** here*

- We can also use this past tense to talk about unreal or improbable present or future situations in a subordinate clause as part of a conditional structure. You can see here some examples, but we'll see this with more details in the conditionals chapter of this course.
- If I **were** you, I would apply right now
 - I'd rather your boyfriend **stopped** calling you in the middle of the night.

***Attention:** Also in these cases, it is usual to use the plural form of the verb to be with I and He/She/It as you can see in the first example.*

- We use past simple after "Would rather" to talk about preferring one thing to another, but just in those sentences when we have two different subjects.

- ☐ I'd rather you didn't go out tonight
- ☐ I'd rather you stayed at home tonight

As there are two different subjects in the sentence, we use the past simple form after would rather, even if we are not talking about the past.

- ☐ I'd rather not go out tonight
- ☐ I'd rather stay at home than go out tonight

Attention: In these sentences, we have just one subject, that's why we use the present simple after would rather.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED?

In this unit, you have learned to talk about past events, clarify their relationship with the present, how often they used to happen, or whether they are still valid in the present.

Further than that, you have also learned that it is possible to use verbs to talk about the present and the future in their past forms.

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