

Lesson on Past Tenses

This lesson is dedicated to Regula from Bubikon who said she found the past tenses confusing.

The *main past tense* in English is the **Past Simple** - *I went, she did, they walked, he came, he saw, he conquered* etc. It is normally used with a *specific (finished) past time* expression - *yesterday, last week, in 2002, two days ago, on Sunday* etc. And it is possible to tell a story using just this tense and no other.

*Last Sunday my husband and I **went** for a jog. We **walked** back home and **saw** a cow with a very young calf. So we **went** to the farmer and **told** him. Then we **went** back and **watched** the farmer **put** the calf into a cart. Then we **went** home.*

The other two past time tenses are the **Past Continuous** (*I was doing, he was walking, they were running* etc.) and the **Past Perfect** (*I had done, he had walked, they had run* etc.) Unlike the Past Simple, they cannot "stand alone". They are *linked* in some way to the Past Simple or to a particular past time point.

He was having a shower when the phone rang. (He started the shower and then the phone rang so he was in the middle of having the shower when it rang).

When she reached the airport, the plane had left. (The plane left before she arrived so it was no longer there).

At 5 p.m. we had finished all our work and it was raining. (The work was completed before 5 p.m. and the rain started before 5 p.m. but it was still in the middle of raining).

The "story" above can be made more interesting or clearer if you also use the Past Continuous and Past Perfect (and not just the Past Simple).

*Last Sunday, the sun **was shining** and so my husband and I went for a jog. We **were walking** back home when we saw a cow which **had just given** birth to a calf. So we went to the farmer and told him what we **had seen**. When we went back, the farmer **was** already **putting** the calf into a cart. When he **had finished**, we went home.*

So, are you ready to test yourself? In the following sentences, put the verb into the correct time form: Past Simple, Past Continuous or Past Perfect.

1. While she (TALK) on the phone, the children (START) fighting and (BREAK) a window.
2. Halfway to the office, Paul (TURN) round and (GO) back home because he (FORGET) to close a window.
3. I (LIE) in bed thinking about getting up when the doorbell (RING)
4. When I (GET) home, everybody (WATCH) TV.
5. He (never SEE) the sea before he (GO) on holiday to Greece.

6. He (WALK) out of the house, (GET) into the car and (DRIVE) away.
7. After he (GET) into the car, he (REALISE) that he (LEAVE) the light on in the bedroom.
8. When we (ARRIVE) in London, it (RAIN)..... so we (BUY) an umbrella.
9. It (RAIN) several times during the Wimbledon semi-final.
10. They (BE) very tired when they (ARRIVE) because they (WALK)for 6 hours.
11. When she (WAKE up) the sun (SHINE) and the birds (SING)
12. She (RUN) to the car park but there was no sign of the coach. It (LEAVE) without her.

And the answers?

1. While she **was talking** on the phone, the children **started** fighting and **broke** a window.
2. Halfway to the office, Paul **turned** round and **went** back home because he **had forgotten** to close a window.
3. I **was lying** in bed thinking about getting up when the doorbell **rang**.
4. When I **got** home, everybody **was watching** TV.
5. He **had** never **seen** the sea before he **went** on holiday to Greece.
6. He **walked** out of the house, **got** into the car and **drove** away.
7. After he **had got / got** into the car, he **realised** that he **had left** the light on in the bedroom.
8. When we **arrived** in London, it **was raining** so we **bought** an umbrella.
9. It **rained** several times during the Wimbledon semi-final.
10. They **were** very tired when they **arrived** because they **had walked** for 6 hours.
11. When she **woke** up the sun **was shining** and the birds **were singing**.
12. She **ran** to the car park but there was no sign of the coach. It **had left** without her.