

Past Progressive Tense

What is the past progressive tense?

The past progressive tense describes an action in progress around a specific time in the past. For example:

What *were* you *doing* at 10:00 this morning?
I *was getting* ready for school (at 10:00 this morning).
What *were* you *doing* when I called you?
I *was walking* the dog (when you called me).

Note that in all the sentences, a particular time is referenced. In the first set of examples, both the question and the answer mention 10:00 a.m. In the second example, *when you called me* refers to a specific time which both speakers understand. (Perhaps, for example, the phone call was placed on a Saturday afternoon around 3:00. Both speakers know this, so the time is specific.)

With more general references to time, use the simple past, as in:

What did you do last night?
I watched TV last night.

What is the sentence structure?

The sentence structure is as follows:

subject | be verb in the past tense | main verb + ing | object/complement (time reference)
Alexis | was | meeting | with her boss at 10:00.
The committee chairman | was | giving | a press conference at 3:00 this afternoon.

How is the past progressive used?

The past progressive usually describes a background action in progress. Subsequent sentences are often in the simple past tense. For example:

Alexis was meeting with her boss at 10:00, so she *missed* the call from her client.
Bill was driving to the store after work. He *got* into a car accident.

Often we link the two sentences together with *when*, and the past progressive sentence provides the longer background action as a time reference.

Bill was driving to the store after work *when* he got into a car accident.
Samantha was mountain climbing *when* she fell and broke her leg.

Is there additional information on past progressive sentences?

When using when and the past progressive, the action in the simple past can interrupt the longer action in progress. For example:

I was brushing my teeth (longer action) *when* my mom called (interrupting action).

My friend was moving the lawn (longer action) *when* it started to rain (interrupting action).

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