Success Center
Directed Learning Activity (DLA)

Understanding the Simple Past and Past Progressive Tenses

G016.1
Directed Learning Activity – Understanding the Simple Past and Past Progressive Tenses

Description: In this Directed Learning Activity (DLA), you will learn how to use the simple past tense and past progressive tense correctly. Explanation and application of rules through practice exercises will guide you in correct usage of these tenses.

Prior Knowledge: It would be helpful to understand how to write a basic sentence. If you need to review this concept, please complete the DLA “Basic Sentence Structure” before attempting this activity. Knowing both the form and spelling of simple past forms of verbs would also be helpful.

Materials: An envelope full of flashcards.

Step One: Assessing Prior Knowledge

On the lines below, explain what you already know about these topics. Please do not look ahead or look for a definition in a book or on the Internet. If you are unsure of the answers, simply write that you do not know.

1) When do you use the simple past tense?


2) When do you use the past progressive tense?


3) What time expressions could be used with the simple past tense?


4. What time expressions could be used with the past progressive tense?


Step Two: Understanding the Functions of the Simple Past and Past Progressive Tenses

Understanding when and how to use the verb tenses correctly refers to paying attention to both the function and form of the tenses. In other words, when are you supposed to use the simple past and past progressive tenses, and what do these tenses look like? Knowing which verb tense to use when speaking and writing will improve your communication skills in English. The chart below shows when to use the simple past and past progressive tenses and commonly used time expressions for each verb tense.

FUNCTIONS OF THE SIMPLE PAST AND PAST PROGRESSIVE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIMPLE PAST FUNCTIONS</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Use with completed events/actions in the past.</td>
<td>1. Yesterday, I took a test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time expressions: yesterday, last night/week/month/year, ago, on Tuesday</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Use with stative verbs in the past time.</td>
<td>2. He owned three houses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A stative verb describes a state rather than an action, and it is not usually used in progressive forms.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Use with habitual or repeated actions/events in the past that have changed.</td>
<td>3. When I lived in Japan, I ate miso soup for breakfast every day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time expressions: every day, sometimes, usually, often, seldom, rarely, never</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Use with a series of completed actions. One action immediately follows the next.</td>
<td>4. When I got home, I removed my shoes, washed my hands, and made dinner.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAST PROGRESSIVE FUNCTIONS</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Use with an action that was in progress at a specific point in time in the past.</td>
<td>1. I was sleeping at 4:00 a.m. this morning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Use when describing two past actions that were occurring at the same time.</td>
<td>2. He was texting while he was driving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Use when describing a past action that was happening when it was interrupted by another action.</td>
<td>3. He hit the car in front of him while he was texting.</td>
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</table>

Exercise 1: Read the sentences below. Write the verb tense and its function on the blank line.

Example: He went to work yesterday. **Simple past – completed action in the past**

1. I was eating breakfast when the phone rang. **Past progressive – action in progress**

2. The dog belonged to his daughter. **Simple past – completed action in the past**

3. When I was a little boy, my mother read to me every night. **Simple past – completed action in the past**
4. Last night at 6 p.m., I **was eating** dinner.

5. While Jack **was playing** hockey, Charlie **was watching** TV.

6. I **called** my mother-in-law last night.

7. She **woke up**, **brushed** her teeth, **exercised**, and **took** a shower.

**Exercise 2: Write your own sentence for each of the verb functions below.**

**Example:** *Past Progressive (Interrupted action in the past)*  
* I **was sleeping** when the earthquake struck.

1. **Simple Past (Completed action/event in the past)**

2. **Simple Past (Stative verb in the past)**

3. **Simple Past (Habitual or repeated activity in the past)**

4. **Simple Past (Series of completed actions in the past)**

5. **Past Progressive (Past action in progress at specific time in past)**

6. **Past Progressive (Two past actions occurring at the same time)**

7. **Past Progressive (Interrupted action in the past)**
Exercise 3: Underline the verb in the appropriate tense – simple past or past progressive – and then write its function verb on the blank line.

Example:
I After I found the wallet, I immediately _________ to the police station.

  a. went
  b. was going
Explanation: Use the simple past for a series of completed actions in the past.

1. His plane _________ at 9:00 p.m. last night.
   a. arrived
   b. was arriving
Explanation: ________________________________

2. Lisa wasn’t home in the morning. She _________ at the library.
   a. studied
   b. was studying
Explanation: ________________________________

3. They were watching a movie on television when the electricity _________ out.
   a. went
   b. was going
Explanation: ________________________________

4. While I was doing my homework, I _________ to music.
   a. listened
   b. was listening
Explanation: ________________________________

5. As soon as I got to work, I _________ on my uniform and helped the customers.
   a. put
   b. was putting
Explanation: ________________________________

6. I _________ to school every morning when I was a child.
   a. walked
   b. was walking
Explanation: ________________________________

7. While she _________ on the computer, the telephone rang.
   a. worked
   b. was working
Explanation: ________________________________

8. Last Thursday I _________ a dentist appointment.
   a. had
   b. was having
Explanation: ________________________________
Step Three: Forming the Simple Past and Past Progressive Tenses

In addition to understanding the function of verbs, it is also important to form them correctly. The form of a verb tense refers to what the verb tense looks like. Learning to use the correct form of a verb tense takes time and practice. Make or buy some flashcard cards to practice. Write the forms (affirmative, negative, yes/no question, and wh- question) on flashcards and review them on a regular basis to help you pay attention to form. When reviewing with flashcards, say the sentences aloud.

**FORMING THE SIMPLE PAST AND PAST PROGRESSIVE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AFFIRMATIVE</th>
<th>NEGATIVE AND NEGATIVE CONTRACTION</th>
<th>YES/NO QUESTION AND SHORT ANSWER</th>
<th>WH- QUESTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Simple Past</strong></td>
<td>I/you/they/we/he/she/it walked</td>
<td>did not/didn’t walk</td>
<td>Did + subject + base verb?</td>
<td>Wh- word + did + subject + base verb?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Did you walk to school?</td>
<td>Why did you walk to school?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, I did.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No, I didn’t.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past Progressive</strong></td>
<td>I/you/they/we were walking</td>
<td>were not/weren’t walking</td>
<td>Was/Were + subject + verbing?</td>
<td>Wh- word + was/were + subject + verbing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He/she/it was walking</td>
<td>was not/wasn’t walking</td>
<td>Were they walking?</td>
<td>Why were they walking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, they were.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No, they weren’t</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Exercise 4: Write the negative, negative contraction, yes/no question, short answer, and wh-question for each of the sentences below.

**Example:** She worked every day.

(negative)  
She did not work every day.

(negative contraction)  
She didn’t work every day.

(yes/no question)  
Did she work every day?

(short answer)  
Yes, she did. No, she didn’t.

(wh- question)  
Where did she work?

1. They worked yesterday.

(negative)  

(negative contraction)  

(yes/no question)  

(short answer)  

2. They were talking.
(negative)
(negative contraction)
(yes/no question)
(short answer)
(wh- question)

3. He was talking
(negative)
(negative contraction)
(yes/no question)
(short answer)
(wh- question)

4. She sang.
(negative)
(negative contraction)
(yes/no question)
(short answer)
(wh- question)

Exercise 5: Practice with Flashcards
Take out the flashcards in the envelope that you checked out with this DLA. Read the sentence on the front of the card. Before flipping the card over, say aloud or write down the forms (negative, negative contraction, yes/no question, short answer, and wh- question). Keep practicing until you are able to recite all of the forms of the sentence correctly.

Exercise 6: Complete each sentence with the correct form of the verb in bold. Choose the simple past or past progressive form of the verb, depending on the function of the sentence.

Example: When the alarm clock rang, she (wake) woke up.

1. While David (cook) ______________________, Jack (do) ________________________ his homework.
2. The students (take) _________________________ a test when the teacher’s cell phone (ring) _________________________.

3. Karina (turn) _________________________ off the lights and (go) _________________________ to bed.

4. I (have) _________________________ dinner when suddenly I (hear) _________________________ a loud bang.

5. When I (be) _________________________ on my way home, I (see) _________________________ an accident.

6. I (not/understand) _________________________ anything they she said.

7. Yesterday she (go) _________________________ to school, (take) _________________________ out her books, and (study) _________________________ for her test.

8. When I lived in Vietnam, I (no/own) _________________________ a car.

9. Please, officer, do not give me a ticket. I (no/text) _________________________ while I was driving.

10. When I (get) _________________________ home from work, I (cook) _________________________ dinner for my family.

Step Four: Writing Questions

Exercise 7: Write a question for each answer using the simple past or past progressive.

Example:  
Q: What were you doing when I called you?  
A: I was surfing the Internet.

1. Q: _________________________  
A: He moved to California in 1999.

2. Q: _________________________  
A: No, I wasn’t texting.

3. Q: _________________________  
A: Yes, they finished their homework.

4. Q: _________________________  
A: Yes, I worked during my summer vacation.

5. Q: _________________________  


A: She didn’t go to the movies because she felt sick.

Step Five: Writing with the Simple Past and Past Progressive Tenses

Now that you have practiced choosing and using the appropriate functions and forms of the simple past and past progressive tenses in individual sentences, it is time to apply what you have learned by writing a longer passage.

Exercise 8: Write a paragraph (7-10 sentences) describing what you did today from the moment you woke up until now. Describe your activities in detail. Use the simple past and past progressive tenses. Try to use some of the following words in your paragraph:

when while wake up eat drive take go

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Step Six: Assessing What You Have Learned About Past Tenses

Before you meet with a tutor to review this DLA, summarize the most important points that you have learned about the simple past and past progressive tenses on the lines below.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

For Further Practice:


2. English Learner.com (Simple Past and Past Continuous) -
   http://englishlearner.com/tests/past_simple_-_past_continuous_quiz_1.shtml

3. University of Victoria English Language Centre (Simple Past: Regular Verbs) -

4. University of Victoria English Language Centre (Simple Past: Irregular Verbs) -

5. University of Victoria English Language Centre (Simple Past: Negatives and Questions) -

6. University of Victoria English Language Centre (Past Continuous)

7. English Language Study Cards for ESL & EFL Learners Grammar Box by LV International (2010). You may check out these flashcards from the Language Success Center or purchase them at the bookstore.
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________________________________________________________________________
PRINT STUDENT NAME                      STUDENT #

Tutor Feedback:

_____ The student can describe the functions of the simple past tense.

_____ The student can describe the functions of the past progressive tense.

_____ In Step One, the student answered the “Assessing Prior Knowledge” prompts.

_____ In Step Two, Exercise 1, the student chose the correct verb tense and function.

_____ In Step Two, Exercise 2, the student wrote sentences using the appropriate function.

_____ In Step Two, Exercise 3, the student chose the correct verb tense and provided an appropriate written explanation for choosing the verb.

_____ In Step Three, Exercise 4, the student correctly provided the negative, contraction, yes/no question, short answer, and wh- question forms for the each sentence.

_____ In Step Three, Exercise 5, the student provided the correct forms for each sentence on the index cards.

_____ In Step Three, Exercise 6, the student chose the correct verb tense and used correct form for each sentence.

_____ In Step Four, Exercise 7, the student wrote an appropriate question for each answer.

_____ In Step Five, Exercise 8, the student wrote a paragraph with 7-10 sentence using some of the given words and the simple past and past progressive tenses.

_____ In Step Six, the student completed the “Post-Assessment” section.

Additional Comments: _____________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
PRINT INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR NAME                      DATE

INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR SIGNATURE

STUDENT – DO NOT FORGET TO TURN THIS SHEET IN AT THE FRONT DESK!

You may not get credit for completing this DLA if you fail to leave this sheet with the front desk receptionist.