GRAMMAR • Past Tenses

Past Simple

We use the Past Simple:
• to talk about actions or situations which happened and finished in the past,
  He sold his car yesterday.
  During our last class we asked him many questions.
• to talk about actions/events which happened in the past one after another (we often use the Past Simple in stories).
  Ann finished her homework and went to visit her friend.
  I switched off the computer and locked the door.

Time Expressions (time adverbials) used with the Past Simple:
yesterday (morning/evening), last (year/month/week/Friday/night), in (January/1966/the 1970s),
two days/a week/ten years ago, when I was (12/young),
one (day/morning)

Past Continuous

We use the Past Continuous:
• to describe actions in progress at a certain time in the past,
  They were waiting for us in front of the cinema.
  At midnight I was still tossing and turning in my bed.
• to talk about temporary situations or habits in the past,
  At that time Bethany was studying law at Cambridge.
  Were you living on your own when you were a student?
• to talk about actions or situations in the past during which shorter events happened (for these we use the Past Simple).
  Mark and Ruth were dancing when I came in.
  Somebody knocked on the door while I was arguing with my sister.

For complete finished states or actions, we normally use the Past Simple, and not the Past Continuous, even if these events happened repeatedly or lasted for a longer time.

Even if she was in a bad mood, she tried (NOT was trying) to joke with us.
We went (NOT were going) to the park every day last week.

Past Perfect

We use the Past Perfect:
• when we talk about the past events in non-chronological order (the Past Perfect is used to express an event or situation which happened before other past events expressed in the Past Simple).
  On the way to school I remembered that I had left my history book at home. (the second event happened before the first = first I left the book, then I remembered)
  When we got home, everybody had already gone to sleep. (the second event happened before the first = first everybody went to sleep, then we got home)

Used to

We use used to:
• to talk about states (e.g. be, have, believe, like) and actions which were true or happened regularly in the past, but are not true or don’t happen regularly now.
  Tom used to read a lot. (he doesn’t do it any more or doesn’t read that much now)
  You didn’t use to be so talkative. (now it’s different = you’re talkative now)

When we talk about states and actions which did not happen regularly or we don’t want to emphasize a change in relation to the past, we use the Past Simple.

Once I slipped on a banana skin. (it happened only once, not regularly)
She earned a lot of money. (we don’t know if now she still earns a lot)

The structure used to refers only to past habits. We cannot use it for habits or actions happening regularly in the present. They are expressed by the Present Simple:
I used to play tennis on Mondays. (past habit)
I play (NOT used to play) tennis on Mondays. (present habit)
Circle the option which has a similar meaning to the original sentence. Explain your choice.

1. When we got to the cinema, the film had started.
   a. We watched the beginning of the film.
   b. We missed the beginning of the film.

2. She used to smoke when she was younger.
   a. She doesn’t smoke now.
   b. She smokes now, too.

3. I switched off the lights and went home.
   a. I switched off the lights at home.
   b. I switched off the lights in some other place.

4. I painted a picture while she was reading a newspaper.
   a. Painting a picture took more time than reading a newspaper.
   b. Reading a newspaper took more time than painting a picture.

5. They had been on the plane for two hours when the sun set.
   a. Their plane took off after sunset.
   b. Their plane took off before sunset.

6. When you called, Tom was taking a shower.
   a. Tom started the shower before you called.
   b. You called before Tom started the shower.

Using the word in capitals write the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence.

1. It was John’s first time on the plane. BEFORE
   John had never been on the plane before.

2. Robert finished writing his essay and then he went out with his friends. WHEN

3. I walked into the classroom in the middle of her conversation with the teacher. WAS

4. I don’t see Gill as often as before. USED

5. Brenda felt sick from eating three bars of chocolate. BECAUSE

6. We were both very busy yesterday evening: me with my Maths homework and Joanna with the ironing. WHILE

7. The Perkins are very rich now but this was not the case before. DIDN’T

EXAM PRACTICE

The letter below is a sample answer to an exam task. Read it and complete the gaps with the verbs in brackets in the correct tense (Past Simple, Past Continuous, Past Perfect), or use the structure used to.

Dear Janet,

I promised to tell you all about Adam, so here is our story.
One night I __________ (try) to finish my project when I __________ (receive) an instant message from some guy. He __________ (claim) that we __________ (meet) at a party. I __________ (not remember) that. But he was the funniest person I __________ (ever/encounter) on the Net, so we just __________ (keep) talking and at the end __________ (exchange) our phone numbers.

At that time I __________ (live) in Prague and Adam __________ (study) in Budapest. We __________ (only/know) each other for two weeks when he __________ (invite) me to spend the weekend in his city. I __________ (know) Budapest quite well because I __________ (go) there on school trips as a child.

When I __________ (arrive) in Budapest, Adam __________ (wait) for me at the station. By Sunday evening I __________ (know) that I __________ (bump) into Mr Right on the internet.

From then on, we __________ (speak) on Skype every day. Only three months __________ (pass) before I __________ (decide) to move to Budapest. I can’t believe now I __________ (think) that Internet dating was only for desperate, lonely people!

How are things with you?

Lots of love,

Eva

GRAMMAR • PAST TENSES

Look at the instructions for the exam task below. Match the bulleted points to the proper sections of the letter above.

Your English friend Janet visited you four months ago in Prague. But now you have a new boyfriend and you have recently moved to Budapest. You are going to write a letter to Janet, in which you will:

• explain how you met Adam
• describe how the relationship developed
• give some details of your visit to Budapest

Begin like this: Dear Janet,