Past simple and continuous; used to and would

The earliest films were made by the Lumière brothers in France in the late nineteenth century, but they were very different from most films today: they all used to be very short, black and white only, and they didn't use to have any sound.

1 Completed actions and situations (past simple)

We use this for completed actions in the past: Julius Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BCE. If the context is clear, it is not necessary to give a past time reference:

But Caesar’s troops failed to defeat the indigenous tribes. (in 55 BCE)

We use the past simple for

• actions happening at the same time:
  At the junction I took the left turn while Micky took the right.
• repeated actions: My brother applied for a visa six times before he got one.
• sequences of actions: Silverman ran to the car, jumped in and raced off into the night.
• one action resulting in another:
  Wall Street traders lost a fortune when the Asian markets collapsed.
  (The markets collapsed with the result that the traders lost a fortune.)
• states in the past: We lived just outside Oxford for several years, but we didn’t like it much.

Common time expressions used with the past simple are ago, last (week/month), (the day before) yesterday, the other day/week and conjunctions such as when, (just) as, while and after:

I heard the news hours ago. Mum called me just after you left this morning.
The door opened and the director came in (just) as I finished my presentation.

Differences between past simple and present perfect ➤ Unit 23.6

2 Past actions and situations in progress (past continuous)

The past continuous describes an action in progress at a point of time in the past; the action began before this point of time and continued after it:

We didn’t hear the intruder because we were sleeping on the top floor that night.

At the time of our arrival the city was going through a period of rapid expansion.

We often use the past continuous to show that a past action was

• temporary: During my training I was earning a lot less than my wife.
• changing or developing: His symptoms were becoming more pronounced each day.
• providing a background to completed past actions:
  Darkness was falling over the city as James hurried back to college ...

We can use the past continuous for two actions in progress at the same time:

We were watching the sky and listening for the first sounds of the dawn chorus ...

We usually use the past simple for repeated actions in the past, but we can use the past continuous if we want to emphasise that the repeated actions took place over a temporary period:

She received chemotherapy on a weekly basis. (repeated action)

For the first three months she was receiving chemotherapy on a weekly basis.
(repeated action, but only for three months)

As with the present continuous, we can use the past continuous (with always and other adverbs) to talk about repeated actions that happened very often, or to express annoyance (➤ Unit 20.2):

The track was so rough that we were continually mending punctures.

They never saved their money. They were always borrowing cash from us.
3 Interrupted actions

We use the past continuous to contrast an ongoing action with a single (past simple) event which interrupts it:
Seven
t cars were crossing the bridge when the supports collapsed into the river.

We can put either clause first, and we can use when, while or as to introduce the interrupted action:
Messengers arrived with the news of Mary’s plot when/while/as Queen Elizabeth was hunting.

We use when (not while) to introduce the interrupting (past simple) action:
× Queen Elizabeth was hunting while messengers arrived with the news of Mary’s plot.
✓ Queen Elizabeth was hunting when messengers arrived with the news of Mary’s plot.

If the background action finishes just before the event which interrupts it, we prefer to use the past perfect continuous (Unit 22.1).

4 Other uses of the past continuous

We can use the past continuous to describe past arrangements that may or may not have taken place:
Nancy was taking the next flight to Paris so she had to cut short the interview.
(Nancy had an existing arrangement to take a flight to Paris.)

We often use verbs such as plan, expect, hope for unfulfilled arrangements:
Were you expecting to have a meeting this morning? I’m afraid I’m too busy today.

Future in the past and unfulfilled pasts Unit 29

We can make requests, suggestions and questions more tentative and polite by using the past continuous. We often use the verbs think and wonder:
We were wondering if you would like to join us. (= Would you like to join us ...?)
Were you planning on going somewhere else later? (= Are you planning on ...?)

5 used to and would

Both used to and would describe actions which happened regularly in the past but no longer happen or now happen with more or less frequency:
They used to get paid every three months. (Now they get paid weekly.)
We would get up early every Thursday to go to the market. (We don’t now.)

To avoid confusion with other uses of would, we usually mention the past time or situation:
He would give her a lift to work in the days before she passed her test.

We often continue with would after a past narrative has started with used to:
Dad used to travel a lot on business. He would be away for weeks at a time, and he’d always bring presents back with him.

We use used to, but not would, to describe past states which have changed:
Lithuania used to be part of the Soviet Union. (It isn’t now.)

× The capital of Nigeria would be Lagos but now it’s Abuja.
✓ The capital of Nigeria used to be Lagos but now it’s Abuja.

We use the past simple, NOT used to, for:
• periods of time: They lived in Darwin for six years. (× They used to live ... for six years.)
• a number of times: We visited them there three times. (× We used to visit them ... three times.)

Don’t confuse used to + infinitive with be/get used to which means 'be/become accustomed to':
I used to live alone. (= I lived alone at a time in the past.)
He wasn’t used to living on his own. (= He wasn’t accustomed to it.)

* Many people now use didn’t used to and did (you) used to in negatives and questions, although this was considered to be non-standard in the past.
Practice

1 Match the underlined words in 1–10 with the explanations A–J.

1 They ran the same test eight times before they found the bug in the software.
2 The soldier was trying to deactivate the land mine when it exploded.
3 While we were at university, we would often go to the capital to take part in political demonstrations.
4 Food was in short supply throughout the war.
5 Claire jumped out of her chair, ran to the balcony and grabbed the screaming child.
6 The whole time that I was talking, the one child in the audience was howling!
7 Lorenzo the Magnificent died in Florence in 1492.
8 We had a busy morning. Steve answered the phone calls and I dealt with the emails.
9 A day out for the family used to cost considerably less than it does now.
10 The fire was raging through the whole night.

A A single or completed action in the past.
B A sequence of different, completed actions in the past.
C Two actions which happened at the same time in the past.
D The same action repeated several times in the past.
E A state existing for some time in the past.
F An action in progress in the past.
G One action interrupted by another, shorter action.
H Two actions in progress at the same time in the past.
I A description of a past situation which is different now.
J A past action that happened frequently but no longer happens.

2 GRAMMAR IN USE Read the text and choose the correct verb form in italics. If both forms are correct, choose both. [2.38] Listen and check.

Saturday morning cinema

One of the highlights of life when I was a child (1) was / would Saturday morning cinema, or the pictures, as we called it then. I remember the first time my mother (2) allowed / used to allow me to go, when I was about ten. It (3) was / would be so exciting! That was with my big brother, of course; she didn’t (4) use to allow / allow me to go on my own at that age. From then on, I (5) would / used to go every Saturday morning, as long as Dad (6) earned / was earning money at the time – his work (7) was / used to be a bit erratic.

My brother and I (8) would always / always used to meet up with a big group of friends and (9) we’d go / we were going to the local flea pit – it (10) was / would be a really old cinema, which was probably why the Saturday kids’ pictures (11) were / used to be held there! We (12) would always / always used to get there about half an hour before the doors opened so we could get the best seats, and while we (13) were queuing / used to queuing some of the older children would go and buy sweets.

It’s amazing to think now what a bargain it (14) was / would be – I can’t remember how much we paid, but we (15) used to get / were getting about three films of different types. There’d often be a couple of parts of serials, and then a main feature. It (16) would / used to be really good value.

Then we’d all leave the cinema hungry, despite the sweets, and troop back home for the lunch that our mothers had spent the morning making. That was the main point of course – to get us out of the house for a few hours!
Complete the sentences with suitable verbs from the box. Use the past simple or past continuous. [1239] Listen and check.

announce blow collapse cook decide feel hit leave live manage mention press run into see set off settle down soar spend stand start study take

1. I ........................ at the bus stop when I ........................ the car slam into the lamp-post.
2. The icy wind ........................ through the trees as we ........................ on our journey.
3. Brad ........................ exhausted so he ........................ onto the sofa, ........................ the button on the remote control and ........................ for an evening vegetating in front of the box.
4. The twins ........................ the afternoon shopping because they ........................ for their flatmates that evening.
5. Unfortunately for us, we ........................ on the wrong side of Miami when Hurricane Andrew ........................ the city.
6. Share prices ........................ when the government ........................ record growth figures.
7. Karen and Anna first ........................ writing to each other about their research when they ........................ for their doctorates.
8. I ........................ early the next morning so I ........................ to have an early night.
9. My younger brother ........................ the driving test five times before he ........................ to pass.
10. I ........................ Clare at the supermarket the other day and she ........................ that you might be looking for work.

Find eight mistakes with past forms and correct them. Tick (√) the correct sentences.

1. Lady Jane Grey used to be Queen of England for only nine days in 1553.
2. What were the children doing while their mother was visiting her sister in the hospital?
3. The huge liners doing the journey from Europe to the United States would be extremely comfortable for the first class passengers but those travelling in steerage suffered appalling conditions.
4. The victim was talking on her mobile phone while her attacker struck from behind.
5. Mary didn’t join us yesterday evening because she expected a phone call from her son in Australia.
6. Before printing and literacy became widespread, people would get news from the town crier, who would shout out anything newsworthy for the whole town to hear.
7. I’m sure that children didn’t use to being so undisciplined when we were at school!
8. The fox cubs were coming into our garden several times during the spring to try to get our chickens.
9. Gerald wasn’t used to having such dark hair – do you think he’s coloured it?
10. Sorry I’m late. I was expecting to catch the early train but I got held up in traffic on the way to the station.
11. Would your mother work when you were a child or did she stay at home?
12. I found it really difficult when I got the job on the early news programme as I really wasn’t used to getting up at five o’clock in the morning!
## QUICK CHECK 1  MODULES 5 AND 6  Verb tenses and forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TENSE/FORM</th>
<th>USE</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
<th>UNIT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>present simple</td>
<td>facts/permanent situations</td>
<td>Water boils at 100°C.</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>regular activities and routines</td>
<td>We always take public transport.</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>telling stories</td>
<td>The film takes place in the US.</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>commentaries (quick actions)</td>
<td>France kicks off, Vieira passes ...</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>describing states</td>
<td>I don’t believe that story.</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>present continuous</td>
<td>actions happening now</td>
<td>I’m just finishing something.</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>temporary situations</td>
<td>She’s spending the summer with us.</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>repeated actions in a temporary time frame</td>
<td>I’m feeding the neighbour’s cat every day this week as she’s in hospital.</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>criticising someone</td>
<td>You’re always losing your key.</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>changes and trends</td>
<td>The economy is getting worse.</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>describing pictures/ commentaries</td>
<td>A woman is coming into the room.</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The teams are entering the field now ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past simple</td>
<td>completed actions in the past</td>
<td>I passed my driving test last week.</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>repeated actions in the past</td>
<td>My brother took the test six times.</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sequence of past actions</td>
<td>We arrived at the airport and took a taxi to the hotel.</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>past states</td>
<td>We lived in Oxford for several years.</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past continuous</td>
<td>an action in progress at a time in the past</td>
<td>We didn’t hear the intruder because we were sleeping on the top floor.</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>temporary situations in the past</td>
<td>We were living in Beijing at the time of the 2008 Olympics.</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>repeated actions in a temporary time frame</td>
<td>For the first three months she was receiving treatment every week.</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a background situation</td>
<td>Darkness was falling over the city ...</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>criticising someone</td>
<td>They were always borrowing money.</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>an interrupted action</td>
<td>He was driving when the car crashed.</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>unfulfilled plans</td>
<td>I was hoping to study animation.</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>used to</td>
<td>past actions and states that no longer happen/exist</td>
<td>They used to get paid weekly. Serbia used to be part of Yugoslavia.</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>would</td>
<td>past actions that no longer happen (not states)</td>
<td>He would be away for weeks at a time in those days.</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past perfect simple</td>
<td>an action before a time or another action in the past</td>
<td>Before I found a job, I had been to twenty interviews.</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>giving reasons for past actions/feelings</td>
<td>Emily was unhappy because her husband hadn’t bought her a present.</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>unfulfilled plans</td>
<td>They had hoped to get to the summit but it proved impossible.</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past perfect continuous</td>
<td>ongoing past actions/states before another time/action</td>
<td>He had been working for over an hour when the auditors turned up.</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>focus on duration</td>
<td>He had been trying to get the film made for more than twenty years.</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>giving reasons for past actions/feelings</td>
<td>He was exhausted as he’d been driving all afternoon.</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 4 British and American English

Nouns ❯ Unit 1
Some uncountable nouns in British English are countable in American English.
Br E: accommodation (uncountable) Am E: accommodations (countable)
In American English collective nouns are usually followed by singular verbs only:
Our class is studying Dickens this semester. The United Nations has announced a ceasefire.

Prepositions ❯ Unit 11
Br E: at the weekend Am E: on the weekend
In American English it is possible to omit the preposition before days.
Br E: Our flight leaves on Tuesday.
Am E: Our flight leaves Tuesday.
Br E: I'll be staying at the Hilton from Friday until/till/to Monday.
Am E: I'll be staying at the Hilton Friday through Monday.
In American English it is common to use a quarter/ten/five, etc. of (or till) and a quarter/ten/five, etc. after the hour in addition to the British English use of to and past.
Br E: It's (a) quarter to nine. It's ten to seven. It's (a) quarter past nine. It's twenty past seven.
Am E: It's a quarter of nine. It's ten till seven. It's a quarter after nine. It's twenty after seven.

Adverbs ❯ Unit 17
In informal American English real and good can be used instead of really and well:
She's a real nice girl. That test was real hard. Congratulations. You did good!

Tenses ❯ Units 19 and 23
In American English have got is not common; it is used mainly in speech (and not in writing); negative and question forms are not common.
Br E: Have you got a pen I could borrow? Am E: Do you have a pen I could borrow?
In American English the past participle form of get when it means 'has become/obtained/received', etc. is gotten: Hollywood movies have gotten more violent in recent years.
In American English, the past simple can be used after a superlative:
Br E: This is the worst movie I've ever seen. Am E: This is the worst movie I ever saw!
It is common in American English to use the past simple with the adverbs just, already, yet and still:
'We just received the invitation to your daughter's wedding. Did she buy a wedding dress yet?'
'No, she still didn't make up her mind what style she wants.' 'What about the rings?'
'Yeah, they bought those already - they got them in New York last weekend.'

Conditionals ❯ Unit 38
It is possible to use would in both clauses in American English but NOT in British English.
Am E: The blockades wouldn't happen if the police would be firmer with the strikers.
Br E: The blockades wouldn't happen if the police were firmer with the strikers.
In American English, it is possible to use would have in the if clause. This is becoming more common in British English, although many people consider it incorrect.
Am E: If the play would have finished on time, we wouldn't have missed the train.
Br E: If the play had finished on time, we wouldn't have missed the train.

Question tags ❯ Unit 79
Note the following contrasts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Br E</th>
<th>have</th>
<th>Oliver has a lot of friends, hasn't he?/doesn't he?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Am E</td>
<td>have</td>
<td>Oliver has a lot of friends, doesn't he?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>