22 Past perfect simple and continuous

Award-winning film star Grace Kelly had been acting on stage and in television for three years before she made her first Hollywood movie. But by the age of twenty-six, she had given up her film career to live as a royal princess in Monaco.

1 Actions and situations before a time in the past

We use the past perfect simple to describe a single action, or repeated actions, completed before a time in the past:
The new owners found that the timbers had been patched up several times.

We often include a specific time reference, such as a clause with when or by the time:
By the age of twenty-six, Grace Kelly had given up her film career.

We also use this form to describe a situation which existed before a past event:
At the time of her trial last year, Hinkley had been in prison for eight months.

We use the past perfect continuous to describe an ongoing situation or action which continued up to, or stopped just before, a time in the past, often with before or by the time:
Grace Kelly had been acting for three years before she made her first movie.

We often use the continuous with for or since when we want to focus on the duration of an action:
Kubrick had been trying to get the film made for more than twenty years.
The eager fans had been waiting in line for over six hours since the early hours of the morning.

We don't usually use the past perfect continuous for actions and background situations still continuing at the same time as the past simple narrative. We prefer to use the past continuous:
We were living in New York when John was made redundant.

(an ongoing situation at the time of the redundancy)

Compare these examples:

Jane called the boys in for lunch.

They were playing in the garden.

Jane called the boys in for lunch.

They had been playing in the garden.

2 Completed and ongoing actions

The past perfect simple often refers to a completed action, whereas the past perfect continuous may refer to an action that was still ongoing at the time of the statement:
The leaves had fallen from the trees early that year and they were completely bare.
The leaves had been falling from the trees and the ground underfoot was very slippery.

We do not mention the number of times that we have done an action when we use the past perfect continuous:
✘ Jill had only been watching TV twice that week.
✔ Jill had only watched TV twice that week. (repeated action: past perfect simple)
3 Past reasons
We often use the past perfect to describe the reason for a past action or situation:
David didn’t join the agency as he’d signed up with a rival firm.
The survivors looked painfully thin. They had been living on emergency rations since the accident.

4 Sequence of past actions
We can use the past perfect with the past simple to make a sequence of events clear.
We use the past perfect for the earlier action and the past simple for the later one:
When we got back, the babysitter had put the children to bed.

8.30 9.30
The babysitter had put the children to bed. We got back.

Notice the difference if both verbs are in the past simple:
When we got back, the babysitter put the children to bed.

9.00 9.10
We got back. The babysitter put the children to bed.

We can use just with the past perfect to show that the earlier action was very recent:
We wanted to talk to the manager in charge but she’d just left.

Or we can use already to show that the action happened sooner than we expected:
When we got back, we were shocked to find that the babysitter had already gone home.

We don’t usually use the past perfect if the sequence is obvious and the first action makes the second happen:
[I had opened the door and let him in.]
✓ I opened the door and let him in. (He was able to come in because I opened the door.)

We can use either the past perfect or the past simple with time conjunctions, e.g. after, before, as soon as, when:
She ushered me out of the room as soon as I paid/had paid my subscription.

With before + past perfect the action in the past simple happens first:
I left university before I’d finished the course I was taking.

We can use this pattern for a past action which prevented a later action from happening:
She sacked him before he’d had a chance to explain his behaviour.

5 Other uses
We can use the past perfect with superlatives, ordinals (the first, second, last, etc.), the only, etc. + ever:
I remember seeing ‘Nightmare on Elm Street’ when I was only eighteen. It was the most frightening film I’d ever seen.
They wanted us to go on the higher slopes but it was only the second time we’d ever done any skiing.

We use the past perfect with verbs such as hope, expect, want, plan, think about, wish to describe past intentions which were unfulfilled:
They had hoped to get to the summit, but Travers fell ill at base camp.
We’d been planning the merger for weeks when we received the news that it was all off.

Remember that we don’t usually use the continuous form with state verbs:
Suzie had wanted to leave her job and start her own business, but then she was offered a fantastic promotion and decided to stay.

State verbs ➜ Unit 25.1
Practice

1 Choose the best sentence, A or B, to illustrate each picture.

**1**
A I felt ill when I ate the pudding.
B I felt ill when I'd eaten the pudding.

**2**
A When I returned to my hotel room, the maid made the bed.
B When I returned to my hotel room, the maid had made the bed.

**3**
A I explained to my host that I'd been fixing the car, which had broken down.
B I explained to my host that I was fixing the car, which had broken down.

**4**
A The matinée performance started when we got there.
B The matinée performance had started when we got there.

**5**
A Carrie was excited because she was travelling to South Africa.
B Carrie was excited because she had travelled to South Africa.

**6**
A Petra had been baking a cake when we went to her new flat for tea.
B Petra had baked a cake when we went to her new flat for tea.

**7**
A I hoped to get a good result for my final exams.
B I had hoped to get a good result for my final exams.

**8**
A I sat down before the doctor had told me the bad news.
B The doctor told me the bad news before I had sat down.
Choose the most suitable verb form in italics. 

1. So I turned / had turned on my heels and walked out of the shop in disgust.
2. Many voters were turned away from the voting stations although they had queued / queued for hours to cast their vote.
3. The mechanics had been taking / had taken the engine apart several times before they were able to locate the source of the mysterious rattle.
4. By 1280 Genghis Khan had conquered / had been conquering the whole of China.
5. She was surprised to find the fridge empty; the children had eaten / had been eating everything!
6. Our lead actor turned up and he was word perfect; apparently he was practising / had been practising his lines all day.
7. The children wanted to invite their friends to the circus, but their father had booked / had been booking tickets for just the family.
8. Debbie couldn’t understand why her computer crashed; it had been working / was working perfectly for as long as she could remember.
9. My niece’s accident was rather a setback because she hoped / had hoped to pursue a career as a tennis player.
10. Mrs Lawson arrived at casualty in quite a state; she suffered / had been suffering from severe stomach pains for hours.

GRAMMAR IN USE Complete the text with the verbs in brackets. Use the past simple, past perfect, past continuous or past perfect continuous form of the verbs. 

Christopher Reeve 1952–2004

KNOWN PRINCIPALLY as an actor, Reeve

(1) ........................................ (have) many other talents and interests, including directing, which he (2) ........................................ (do) for some years at the time of his death in 2004.

Born in September 1952, Reeve was heavily influenced through his life by his novelist and poet father, F D Reeve. As a child he (3) ........................................ (begin) acting stories with his little brother, and by the age of eight he (4) ........................................ (already/appear) in several school plays.

He studied music and English at Cornell University, and while he (5) ........................................ (study) in his final year, he was accepted into the renowned Juilliard School of the Performing Arts. He (6) ........................................ (perform) both in film and on the stage for a few years when he (7) ........................................ (accept) the part for which he is most remembered, Superman, in 1978.

Always active and a keen sportsman, Reeve (8) ........................................ (do) all his own stunts. In sports terms, his interests focused on horse-riding, and he (9) ........................................ (compete) in events for a few years when, in 1995, he was thrown from his horse and broke his neck. From a man who (10) ........................................ (be) at the peak of his powers, he was now paralysed from the neck down. Perhaps because he (11) ........................................ (be) so active, he was determined to continue making something of his life, and despite his severe injuries, he (12) ........................................ (continue) to act and he started directing. In October 2004 Reeve (13) ........................................ (promote) a film that he (14) ........................................ (recently/direct) – The Brooke Ellison Story – when he suffered a sudden and unexpected heart attack and fell into a coma. He (15) ........................................ (die) the following day, aged only 52, leaving a wife and three children.