

## Grammar notes: past tenses

### Past simple

The past simple is used:

to talk about completed actions in the past:

My brother **got** a new job in Madrid last week.  
What **did** he **say** when you **told** him?  
Shakespeare **died** in 1616.

to talk about habits in the past:

We always **had** roast beef on Sundays when I was a boy.  
We never **went** abroad for our holidays until the 1970s.  
I **travelled** by bus until I passed my driving test.

to talk about events that happened one after the other:

He **jumped** out of bed, **ran** into the bathroom and **slammed** the door.  
I **came**, I **saw**, I **conquered**.

### Past continuous

The past continuous is used:

to talk about an activity in progress at a particular time in the past:

What **were** you **doing** at 9 o'clock on the night of the murder?  
At 9 o'clock I **was getting** the dinner ready.  
At 2 o'clock everyone **was having** lunch.

to describe a situation or activity:

Cars **were speeding** past and people **were hurrying** towards the station.  
It **was raining** so hard that everyone **was sheltering** in doorways.  
He **was wearing** his best suit.

when a past action is interrupted by a shorter action:

I **was walking** along the road when it **started** to rain.  
Someone **knocked** on the door as I **was getting** dressed.  
I **was wondering** what to do when the phone **rang**.

when a past action takes place during another, longer past action or state:

She **was living** in Madrid when she **met** her husband.  
I **decided** to give up smoking while I **was working** in the hospital.  
I **was learning** Arabic when I **got** the chance to visit Egypt.

### Past simple and past continuous

As far as Spanish speakers are concerned, the main thing that you should remember is that you have more verb tenses in Spanish than we have in English.

trabajé	I <b>worked</b>
trabajaba	-----
estaba trabajando	I <b>was working</b>
estuve trabajando	-----

Even though it might sound strange to you, you need to use the correct English tense according to the rules. Look at the following examples which could help:

When we **arrived** she made some tea. (One action followed another)

When we **arrived** she **was making** some tea. (She was in the middle of making it)

I **Painted** the living room yesterday. (I finished it)

I **was painting** the living room yesterday, (I did part of it)

He **drowned**. (He's dead)

He **was drowning**. (I jumped in and saved him)

He **hit** his brother. (Single action)

He **was hitting** his brother. (Repeated activity)

The old pub **stood** by the river near the bridge. (Permanent)

He **was standing** outside the pub waiting for it to open. (Temporary)

### Past perfect simple and continuous

The past perfect simple expresses an action that happened before a definite time in the past:

I **got** to his house at 10 o'clock, but he **had** already **left**.

She **started** to cry because she **had had** such a terrible day.

I **asked** him if he **wanted** a coffee but he **had** already **had** one.

The continuous is used for longer activities that had been going on up to a definite time in the past:

He **was** a wreck. He **hadn't been sleeping** well because he'd **been worrying** so much about his problems.

The continuous is used for repeated or continuous activities, while the simple is used for completed or single actions:

He **was** drunk. He **had been drinking** all day. (Repeated activity)

He **was** drunk. He **had drunk** a whole bottle of whisky. (Completed action)

## Past perfect and past simple

The past simple can tell a story in chronological order:

She **was** all alone in the world. Her parents **got divorced** when she was a girl, her sister **got married** and **went** to live in Canada, and her boyfriend **left** her after five years of living together.

The past perfect can be used for dramatic effect, looking from one point in the past to another point even further in the past:

She **was** all alone in the world. Her parents **had got divorced** when she was a girl, her sister **had got married** and **gone** to live in Canada, and her boyfriend **had left her** after five years of living together.

The past simple can be used when one action follows another and it's obvious that it happened afterwards:

When the doorbell **rang** I **got up** to answer it.  
I **heard** the milkman and **went** to order an extra carton of milk.

If it's important to show that the second action started after the first one was completed, the first action must be in the past perfect:

When I **had finished** reading the paper, I **threw** it away.  
I **didn't leave** the house until I **had made sure** that all the windows were closed.