

# Past perfect continuous (I had been doing) and past perfect (I had done)

**A** Study these sentences with the past perfect continuous:

- They **had been expecting** the news for some time.
- She **had been wearing** high-heeled shoes, and her feet hurt.
- Mason was arrested, even though he **hadn't been doing** anything illegal.

We use the past perfect continuous when we talk about a situation or activity that happened over a period up to a particular past time, or until shortly before it.

**B** Compare how the past perfect continuous and the past perfect are used:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She <b>had been suffering</b> from flu when she was interviewed.</li> <li>• I'd <b>been finishing</b> some work in the garden and hadn't seen Sue come home.</li> <li>• Bill <b>had been saving</b> since Christmas to buy a new bike.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She <b>had suffered</b> from asthma when she was very young.</li> <li>• I'd <b>finished</b> all my work, so I had very little to do.</li> <li>• Bill <b>had saved</b> enough money to buy the bike he wanted.</li> </ul> |
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☞ We use the past perfect continuous when we talk about the *continuity* or *duration* of a situation or activity, and the past perfect to talk about the *completion* of a situation or activity or its *effects*.

Sometimes the difference between them is simply one of emphasis (see also Unit 8A):

- I'd **been working hard**, so I felt that I deserved a holiday. (emphasises the activity)
- I'd **worked hard**, and the report was now finished. (emphasises the result)

**C** If we talk about *how long* something went on up to a particular past time, we prefer the past perfect continuous. If we talk about *how many* times something happened in a period up to a particular past time, we use the past perfect:

- They **had been travelling** for about 36 hours. (*rather than* They had travelled...)
- We **had been looking** at the painting for about ten minutes before we realised who the artist was. (*rather than* We had looked...)
- I'd **heard** the symphony many times before. (*not* I'd been hearing...)
- The teacher **had let** them get away with their bad behaviour once too often. (*not* ...had been letting them...)

However, some verbs that describe *states* (see Unit 2A) are not often used with continuous tenses, and we use the past perfect with these even when we are talking about how long something went on up to a particular past time:

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- I **had always believed** that it would be easy to get a job. (*not* I had always been believing...)
  - We **had owned** the car for 6 months before we discovered it was stolen. (*not* We had been owning...)

**D** Compare the use of the past perfect continuous and past continuous:

- When we met Simon and Pat, they **had been riding**. (= we met after they had finished)
- When we met Simon and Pat, they **were riding**. (= we met while they were riding)
- When I got home, water **had been leaking** through the roof. (= it was no longer leaking when I got there)
- When I got home, water **was leaking** through the roof. (= it was leaking when I got there)

- 10.1** Complete these sentences using one of the following. Use the past perfect continuous. (You will need to use a negative verb form in some cases.) (A)

pay / bills    stay / friends    smoke / cigar    try / to steal / car    attend / classes  
cycle / quite fast

- 1 She returned to the house where she had been staying with friends.
- 2 Sue ..... until she reached the hill.
- 3 By the smell in the room and his guilty expression I could tell that Alex .....
- 4 The principal called Carmen into his office because she .....
- 5 I had to give Peter some money when I found out that he .....
- 6 He told the police that he ..... He said he thought it belonged to his brother.

- 10.2** Complete the sentences with appropriate verbs, using the same one for each sentence in the pair. Use the past perfect continuous if it is possible; if not, use the past perfect. (B)

- 1 a She took a bottle from the bag she ..... all the way from home.  
b The avalanche ..... them 500 metres down the mountain but no-one was hurt.
- 2 a We ..... for visas well before our departure date, but still hadn't heard anything by the day we were due to leave.  
b She ..... for jobs, without success, since leaving university.
- 3 a He ..... all the way from New York to see me.  
b When the plane was diverted, it ..... from London to Frankfurt.
- 4 a She ..... for the same company since she qualified.  
b He ..... finally ..... his way up from the shop floor to a management position.

Look again at the sentences where you have used the past perfect continuous. In which is the past perfect also possible? (Also, study Unit 9 and decide when you could use the past simple instead of the past perfect in these sentences.)

- 10.3** Choose the past perfect continuous form of the verb if appropriate. If not, use the past perfect. (C)

- 1 Andrew died last week. He ..... from cancer for some time. (suffer)
- 2 I ..... the view many times before, but it never failed to impress me. (see)
- 3 The opposing sides in the war ..... since the president was overthrown. (fight)
- 4 I ..... Megan since we were at school together. (know)
- 5 For years we ..... about buying new carpets, and last weekend we finally went out and ordered some. (talk)
- 6 My car was once again in the garage for repairs. This was the third time it ..... since I got it. (break down)
- 7 Before now we ..... on where to go on holiday. (always agree)

- 10.4** Can you explain the difference between these pairs of sentences? (B & D)

- 1 a When I last went to Moscow, they had renovated St Basil's Cathedral.  
b When I last went to Moscow, they had been renovating St Basil's Cathedral.
- 2 a Although she tried to hide her face, I could see that Clara was crying.  
b Although she tried to hide her face, I could see that Clara had been crying.

