

20 Present simple or continuous?

The Third Man is one of the most famous post-war films. In it, writer Holly Martins is **searching** for his friend Harry Lime in Vienna shortly after the end of World War II. When he is told that his friend has died in an accident, Martins **begins** to suspect that there is something suspicious about the death ...



1 Permanent and temporary situations

We often use the present simple to describe

- permanent situations: *A colony of Antarctic penguins **lives** in Marwell Zoo.*
- facts: *Broken bones in adults **don't heal** as fast as they do in children.*
- things which are generally true:
*British people **drink** a lot of tea, while the French drink more coffee.*
- opinions: *Why don't you come with me? It **seems** silly to take two cars.*

The present continuous describes a temporary situation or action in progress at or around the time of speaking. The action is likely to continue after the time of speaking:

*I'll be with you in a minute. I'm just **finishing** something in the kitchen.*

*My niece from Ireland **is spending** the summer with us. She's really enjoying city life!*

Common adverbs with this form are *now, just, still, at the moment* and *currently*:

*The students **are currently studying** the writings of Günter Grass on the German course.*

We use *live, work, study* and *stay* in the continuous if the action is temporary:

✗ *She **stays** in the Waldorf Astoria on this visit to New York, doesn't she?*

✓ *She's **staying** in the Waldorf Astoria on this visit to New York, isn't she?*



We can use the present simple to draw attention to someone arriving or leaving, with *here comes* and *there goes*. These are always present simple and appear before the subject:

✗ *~~Here is coming~~ the postman.* ✓ *Here **comes** the postman.*

✗ *~~There the last bus goes.~~* ✓ *There **goes** the last bus.*

More on inversion ► Unit 76.3 State verbs and present simple ► Unit 25.1

2 Regular or repeated actions

We use the present simple to describe things that happen on a regular basis:

*As temperatures fall with the approach of winter, the soil **freezes and contracts** ...*

*Many people from the north of Europe **take** their summer holiday in the warmer south.*

We often use the present simple with adverbs of frequency, e.g. *always, sometimes*, and expressions of frequency, e.g. *every day, once a week*:

*Share prices usually **change** on a daily basis – but often by very little.*

*Our two chefs **provide** an excellent choice of hot meals every day.*

It is possible to use the present continuous to talk about repeated events or actions, usually if they happen within a temporary period: *I'm **feeding** the neighbour's cat while she's away.*

Compare:

*Alan loves sweet things. He **eats** a dessert most days.* (habit over a long time)

*Alan's on a diet. He **isn't eating** desserts at the moment.*

(repeated action within a temporary period)