

3 Interrupted actions

We use the past continuous to contrast an ongoing action with a single (past simple) event which interrupts it:

*Seventy 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.)*

*There **didn't use* to be** any crime around here in the old days. (There is 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.