Past Perfect Continuous

The past perfect continuous tense, also known as the past perfect progressive, is used in English to describe actions that were ongoing in the past up to another point in the past. It focuses on the duration of the action and often implies that the action had consequences.

Formation

The past perfect continuous is formed using the past perfect of the verb "to be" (had been) followed by the present participle (the -ing form) of the main verb:

Positive Statement: Subject + had been + present participle (verb-ing)

Example:

- "I had been working at that company for five years before I quit."

Negative Statement: Subject + had not been + present participle (verb-ing)

Example:

- She hadn't been feeling well for several days before she decided to see a doctor."

Question: Had + subject + been + present participle (verb-ing)?

Example:

- "Had you been waiting long before the show started?"

Usage

The past perfect continuous is used for several purposes:

Duration before a point in the past: To show that an action was ongoing for a certain period before another action in the past occurred.
Example:

- "She had been waiting for two hours when the train finally arrived."

Cause of a past action: To explain the reason or cause of a past action or state.
Example:

- "He was exhausted because he had been working all night."

Two past actions in progress: Sometimes used to describe two actions that were happening simultaneously in the past until a certain point.
Example:

- "While she had been studying, he had been cooking dinner."

Time Expressions

Common time expressions used with the past perfect continuous include "**for**" (duration), "**since**" (point in time), "**all day**," "**all morning**," "**all year**," etc., to give a sense of the duration of the action.
Example:

- "They had been traveling for three weeks when they ran out of money."

Examples

Contrast with Past Perfect Simple

While the past perfect simple focuses on the completion of an action in the past before another past action ("I had finished the project when he arrived"), the past perfect continuous emphasizes the duration and ongoing nature of the action ("I had been working on the project for a month when he arrived").

Understanding the past perfect continuous helps in conveying not just the timing of past actions but also their duration and effect, enriching narrative detail and depth in past-tense storytelling.

Past Perfect Continuous Exercise 1:

Choose the correct answer.

1. Why do we use the past perfect continuous tense?
a) To describe a future action
b) To show the duration of a past action up to another point in the past
c) To express a general habit

2. Which question form is correct for the past perfect continuous?
a) Had they been working?
b) Did they been working?
c) Were they been working?

3. "I _____ **(work)** on that project for three months before I quit."
a) have been working
b) had been working
c) was working

4. Which time expression is commonly used with the past perfect continuous?
a) Last year
b) Tomorrow
c) Next week

5. "Before the rain started, I _____ **(walk)** for hours."
a) had been walking
b) was walking
c) walked

6. "The garden was beautiful because she _____ **(take care)** of it for years."
a) was taking care
b) took care
c) had been taking care

7. What is the structure of the past perfect continuous tense?
a) Had been + verb-ing
b) Has been + verb-ing
c) Was + verb-ing

8. Which sentence correctly uses the past perfect continuous tense?
a) She has been reading when he arrived.
b) She had been reading when he arrived.
c) She was reading when he had arrived.

9. How do you form a negative sentence in the past perfect continuous?
a) Was not + verb-ing
b) Has not been + verb-ing
c) Had not been + verb-ing

10. "Before moving to London, he _____ (live) in Paris for 10 years."
a) had been living
b) has been living
c) was living

Past Perfect Continuous Exercise 2:

Complete the indirect versions of the dirtect questions above.

1. By the time the concert started, we _____ **(wait)** in line for over two hours.

2. The ground was wet because it _____ **(rain)** since early morning.

3.He _____ **(work)** at that company for five years before he got a promotion.

4. I _____ **(not pay)** attention to the signs before it was too late.

5. The children were filthy because they _____ **(play)** outside in the mud.

6. I _____ **(try)** to fix that leak for days before I finally called a plumber.

7. They were out of breath because they _____ (**run)**.

8. John _____ **(sleep)** for ten hours when I woke him up.

9. I _____ **(think)** about changing my job for months before I made the decision.

10. How long _____ **(they/look)** for a new house before they found the perfect one?



Past perfect continuous: answer key

Grammar practice · B2 Upper-intermediate

Where two or more answers are given, any of them is correct.

Exercise 1

1. b) To show the duration of a past action up to another point in the past
2. a) Had they been working?
3. b) had been working
4. a) Last year
5. a) had been walking
6. c) had been taking care
7. a) Had been + verb-ing
8. b) She had been reading when he arrived.
9. c) Had not been + verb-ing
10. a) had been living

Exercise 2

1. had been waiting
2. had been raining
3. had been working
4. had not been paying / hadn't been paying
5. had been playing
6. had been trying
7. had been running
8. had been sleeping
9. had been thinking
10. had they been looking

Corrections to the printed pages

Exercise 2: the instructions should read: Complete the sentences with the past perfect continuous form of the verbs in brackets.