

Story key and timeline

Teacher 1 of 4 | Models are choices of viewpoint, not absolute rules.

Original practice for teen and adult English learners who can already form basic past tenses. This is a lesson resource, not a level test or a classroom-tested intervention.

- 1. was carrying** - The narrator is already halfway across the courtyard at 5:30. The continuous presents the carrying as in progress at that time.
- 2. was testing** - This shows Lina's activity in progress in the same opening scene. Tested could present a whole test as an event at that time; it changes the viewpoint rather than breaking a universal grammar rule.
- 3. blew** - The gust moves the sign off the gate: a completed change that starts the search. The narrator is reporting what happened, rather than watching the movement unfold.
- 4. put** - Putting the box down is the completed first step before running. Put has the same spelling in the base and past-simple forms.
- 5. ran** - Then introduces the next step in this sequence. Was running would switch to a view of the run in progress and invite more background context.
- 6. was standing** - The narrator notices Omar already in position beside the hedge. Stood can also describe his position; the continuous makes the snapshot viewpoint especially clear. Accept stood with that explanation.
- 7. pointed** - The pointing is a new action that directs the narrator's search. Was pointing could show a gesture already in progress, with a different emphasis.
- 8. found** - Finding this one sign is the result of the search. Was finding is not the natural choice for this single discovery in the stated sequence.

Reading and timeline checks

1. The narrator was carrying programmes and Lina was testing the microphone.
2. The wind blew the sign off the gate. The narrator found it behind the hedge.
3. Put down the box -> run to the gate -> find the sign -> tie up the sign.

These choices do not establish a CEFR level. Ask learners to justify two answers before using the outcome to choose the next task.

Meaning before signal words

Teacher 2 of 4 | Accept an alternative when its timing is coherent.

1. Already happening or next action?

A. When the audience arrived, Lina was checking the microphone. / B. When the audience arrived, Lina checked the microphone.

A places the check in progress at the arrival. B normally presents the arrival first and the check as the next action. Both are grammatical; they tell different versions of the timing.

2. Does while force a continuous form?

A. While we were waiting, Omar read the programme. / B. While we were waiting, Omar was reading the programme.

Both are possible. A presents the reading as a whole event during the waiting. B focuses on the reading in progress. While establishes the overlap; it does not force every verb into the continuous.

3. Does a duration force the simple form?

A. We checked the cables for ten minutes. / B. We were checking the cables for ten minutes.

A presents the ten-minute activity as a whole. B puts more emphasis on the activity in progress over that period. Both are possible. Neither sentence alone guarantees that every cable was checked.

Form repairs

Did you see the sign fall? After did, use the base form see.

At 5:30, we were waiting beside the gate. The continuous needs were plus the -ing form.

Grammar sources and authorship

British Council LearnEnglish and Cambridge English Grammar Today explain the difference between a whole event and an activity in progress. The story, tasks and models here are original KOE materials, not endorsed resources from those organisations. Sources checked October 4, 2026.

British Council LearnEnglish: Past continuous and past simple

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/free-resources/grammar/a1-a2/past-continuous-past-simple>

Cambridge English Grammar Today: Past continuous or past simple?

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/past-continuous-or-past-simple>

Ten checks: answers and options

Teacher 3 of 4 | Keep the original prompts; improve the explanations.

1. While I was cooking, the phone rang.

This model presents cooking as already in progress when the call happened. Cooked is also possible when treating the cooking as a whole activity during which the phone rang; ask the learner to explain that viewpoint.

2. She was reading a book when the lights went out.

The model places the reading in progress at the change in the lights. Read could suggest a different sequence or whole-event viewpoint with extra context; it does not communicate the intended scene as clearly.

3. We walked home and then we had dinner.

The default reading is two completed steps in order. A continuous choice would need a different, process-focused viewpoint; then alone is not a mechanical tense rule.

4. At eight o'clock last night I was watching a film.

This model answers what was in progress at eight. Watched is possible if the speaker presents watching the film as a whole event associated with that time. The isolated prompt does not rule it out.

5. He was not listening when the teacher explained the rule.

Was not listening with was explaining also works: both activities are viewed as in progress. He did not listen when the teacher explained the rule is possible as a whole-event report. Listening is an activity, not a stative-verb exception.

6. The sun was shining and the birds were singing.

This model sets a scene in progress. The sun shone and the birds sang is also a grammatical way to report the events as a whole. Add context before marking one as incorrect.

7. I knew the answer immediately.

Know describes a state here and normally takes a simple form. Was knowing is not the usual form for this meaning.

8. What were you doing at midnight?

This asks about an activity in progress. What did you do at midnight? is also grammatical; it asks what action happened at that time. Explain the difference instead of rejecting the second question.

9. She lived in Rome for three years, then she moved.

The model reports the finished stay and move as a sequence. Was living can foreground the temporary situation with a different emphasis. A duration such as for three years does not automatically ban a continuous form.

10. While they were arguing, I left quietly.

The argument is in progress during the departure. The sentence does not say that leaving stopped the argument. While they argued is also possible when viewing the argument as a whole overlapping activity.

Teach from the evidence

Teacher 4 of 4 | Suggested sequence, transfer model and next steps.

Suggested lesson route

Read and choose (7-10 minutes): read the story for meaning, then choose the eight forms. Learners can compare in pairs before feedback.

Check the timeline (5 minutes): answer the three reading checks. Label two ongoing situations and order the four main events.

Compare meanings (8-10 minutes): discuss the three sentence pairs and repair the two forms. Ask what changes, not only which tense is correct.

Transfer (10-15 minutes): retell in pairs, then write the rehearsal story. Use the checklist for a focused revision. Extend the time or separate speaking and writing across lessons.

Exit check (3 minutes): collect the two versions individually. The ten quick checks can be follow-up practice rather than another compulsory stage.

One possible writing response

At four o'clock, we were preparing the room for our class rehearsal. Mia was arranging the chairs, and I was checking the music. A driver arrived with a box of costumes. We opened it and found two large hats on top. Suddenly, one hat fell onto the keyboard and the music stopped. I lifted the hat and pressed play again. Mia laughed, moved the box away from the instruments and finished the last row of chairs. Five minutes later, our classmates arrived and the rehearsal began.

One possible 86-word response. Other problems and solutions are welcome. Were preparing, was arranging and was checking establish activities in progress; arrived, opened, found and the later simple forms move through events. Judge the timeline and explanation, not a fixed number of continuous verbs.

Exit-check model

I was doing my homework when my friend called at 7:10. / My friend called at 7:10, and then I started my homework. Equivalent wording is acceptable if the first sentence shows overlap and the second shows the new sequence.

Choose the next step

The learner knows the sequence but omits was/were or uses did + a past form. Use the two repair sentences. Underline the auxiliary and base or -ing form, then make one new example with the same pattern.

Forms are accurate, but every verb is continuous and the event order is unclear. Ask for a four-event skeleton in the past simple. Then add one scene in progress and explain where it belongs.

The learner applies a rigid when/while or long/short rule. Revisit meaning pairs 2 and 3. Accept both forms when the learner can explain the viewpoint. Use a timeline, not a signal-word count.

The isolated choices are secure but retelling breaks down. Allow brief verb notes and a second attempt. Check whether the difficulty is retrieving forms, ordering events or understanding the task.