ESL LAB

Past Simple vs Past Continuous Speaking Pack

Printable cards for adults who know the rule but tell every story in the past simple. Each activity gives students a scene to describe and an event that breaks into it, so the past continuous is needed, not just allowed. The cards and questions are on the page, so pairs work on their own.

LEVEL	STUDENTS	GROUPING	TIME
A2 to C1	Adults and older teens	Pairs, groups or 1-1	10 to 20 minutes each

What's inside, in the order of the blog post

1	**The Lights Went Out**	Twelve blackout cards: say what you were doing when the lights went out	**Page 2**
2	**Freeze Frame**	Look at a busy photo for 30 seconds, then answer from memory	**Page 3**
3	**Ghost Story in Two Voices**	One partner sets the scene, the other makes things happen	**Page 4**
4	**When or While**	Roll two dice, join a long action and a short event	**Page 5**
5	**The Accident Report**	A driver, a cyclist, an insurer and two secrets	**Page 6**
6	**Same Moment, Two People**	Eight moments: what were you and the people at home doing?	**Page 7**
7	**One Photo From Your Phone**	No printing: students use a photo on their own phone	–
8	**Slow Motion Replay**	Ten small disasters, told slowly, scene first	**Page 8**
+	**Fix the Witness Statement**	The driver's statement from activity 5, with eight mistakes	**Page 9**

Print one copy per pair. Pages 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8 have cards: cut on the dashed lines, or keep the page whole and point. Activity 4 needs two dice.

The one difference that matters

PAST CONTINUOUS SETS THE SCENE

It was raining.
We were sitting in the kitchen.
was / were + verb-ing

PAST SIMPLE MOVES THE STORY

The lights went out.
The dog barked.
One event, and something changes.

WHEN AND WHILE

While I was cooking, the phone rang.
I was cooking when the phone rang.
While goes with the long action.

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ACTIVITY 1

The Lights Went Out

1. Last night at nine o'clock, every light in your city went out for ten minutes. Cut out the cards and put them face down.
2. Partner A takes a card and tells the story: *I was washing my hair in the bathroom when the lights went out. My roommate was cooking pasta.* Then say what you did next. Invent it.
3. Partner B asks two questions from the box below. The second one must be about the scene. Partner A answers in full sentences.
4. Swap and take a new card. Play until each of you has told four stories.

PARTNER B, ASK: What did you do next? · What were the other people in your home doing? · What was happening outside? · How long were you sitting in the dark?

1 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
In the bathroom
DOING
washing your hair
Your roommate was cooking pasta.

2 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
In the kitchen
DOING
making pancakes
Your kids were doing their homework.

3 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
On the sofa
DOING
watching the last episode of a series
Your partner was sleeping next to you.

4 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
In the elevator
DOING
going up to the ninth floor
A neighbor's big dog was sitting next to you.

5 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
At your desk
DOING
talking to your boss on a video call
Your cat was walking on the keyboard.

6 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
In the garage
DOING
fixing your bike
Your dad was looking for a tool.

7 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
In bed
DOING
reading a thriller
Your brother was playing video games.

8 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
At the gym in your building
DOING
running on the treadmill
Two neighbors were lifting weights.

9 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
In the living room
DOING
dancing to very loud music
Your neighbors were knocking on the wall.

10 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
At the dinner table
DOING
having dinner with your in-laws
Your mother-in-law was telling a story.

11 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
On the balcony
DOING
watering your plants
The people next door were having a party.

12 9 P.M. · LIGHTS OUT
WHERE
In the hallway
DOING
carrying three bags of shopping
Your phone was ringing in your pocket.

Don't stop at the first half. *I was watching TV.* is only the scene. Partner B says *And then?* until an event arrives.

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ACTIVITY 2

Freeze Frame

1. Look at the photo together for **30 seconds**. Then fold the page on the dashed line, so that the photo is hidden.
2. Take turns to ask the questions below: Partner A asks the odd numbers, Partner B the even ones. Answer from memory, in the past continuous: *He was walking between the tables.*
3. Unfold the page and check in the photo and the answers at the bottom. One point for each right answer. The partner with more points wins.
4. Last round: each partner says what happened one second after the photo. Use the past simple: *The waiter dropped the bottle.*



Photo: Henrique Félix, Unsplash (CC0)

FOLD HERE

1. What was the waiter wearing?
2. What was the waiter doing with his hands?
3. What were the two women at the back table doing?
4. What was the little boy doing?
5. What was the man in the purple T-shirt doing?
6. Was anybody pushing the red stroller?
7. What were the man with the beard and the woman in the flowered top doing?
8. What was the woman in the flowered top doing with her hands?
9. What were the two women with fair hair doing?
10. Was it raining?

Answers: **1** A white shirt and a black tie. **2** He was holding a white cloth. **3** They were talking and laughing. **4** He was walking between the tables. **5** He was leaning back in his chair. **6** No. It was standing next to the two women. **7** They were sitting at a table and talking. **8** She was holding them near her face. **9** They were sitting with their backs to the camera. **10** No. It was a dry, sunny day.

ACTIVITY 3

Ghost Story in Two Voices

YOU NEED this page cut in half, a pencil

1. Choose a place for your story: *an old hotel*, *a cabin in the woods*, *your office at midnight*, *your grandmother's house*.
2. Partner A is the **scene** voice and may only say past continuous sentences. Partner B is the **event** voice and may only say past simple sentences.
3. Take turns, A first. Use a sentence from your card or invent one. Tick a box in the tracker after each turn.
4. After eight turns, swap cards and tell a second story in a new place. Which role was harder?

Partner A · Scene

Say what was happening: was / were + -ing

1. It was raining, and the wind was blowing.
2. The old clock in the hall was ticking.
3. Somewhere a dog was barking.
4. The candles were burning low.
5. My friends were sleeping upstairs.
6. I was sitting alone in the kitchen.
7. The radio was playing an old song.
8. Rain was hitting the windows.
9. Nobody was standing at the door.
10. The trees outside were moving.
11. I was holding my breath.
12. The cat was staring at the wall.

WORDS FOR YOUR OWN SENTENCES

creaking, whispering, shaking, flickering, waiting, hiding, breathing, dripping

Partner B · Event

Say what happened: past simple

1. The front door opened.
2. The lights went out.
3. A glass fell off the table.
4. The phone rang once.
5. A cold hand touched my shoulder.
6. The radio turned on by itself.
7. The mirror cracked.
8. Footsteps came down the stairs.
9. The candle went out.
10. A face appeared at the window.
11. The music stopped.
12. The cat ran out of the room.

WORDS FOR YOUR OWN SENTENCES

screamed, slammed, knocked, disappeared, fell, broke, stopped, whispered my name

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
STORY 1	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
STORY 2	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B

Example: A: *It was raining and the wind was blowing.* B: *The front door opened.* A: *Nobody was standing there.* B: *Then the radio turned on by itself.*

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ACTIVITY 4

When or While

YOU NEED two dice (or one die rolled twice), a pencil

1. Partner A rolls two dice: the **green** die picks a long action, the **pink** die picks a short event. No dice? Close your eyes and point.
2. Join them twice, once with *when* and once with *while*. Then add one sentence about what happened next.
3. Partner B checks the sentences with the rule in the box. One point for each correct sentence, and one more if the ending makes Partner B laugh.
4. Swap. After six rounds each, the partner with more points wins.

LONG ACTIONS (GREEN DIE)		SHORT EVENTS (PINK DIE)	
1	I was driving to work	1	my phone rang
2	we were having dinner with my boss	2	the dog jumped on the table
3	she was giving a presentation	3	the fire alarm went off
4	they were sleeping on the night train	4	a bird flew in through the window
5	I was paying at the supermarket	5	the lights went out
6	he was taking a selfie on a bridge	6	my ex walked in

WHEN long action **when** short event .

WHILE **While** long action , short event .

She was giving a presentation when a bird flew in through the window.
While she was giving a presentation, a bird flew in through the window.

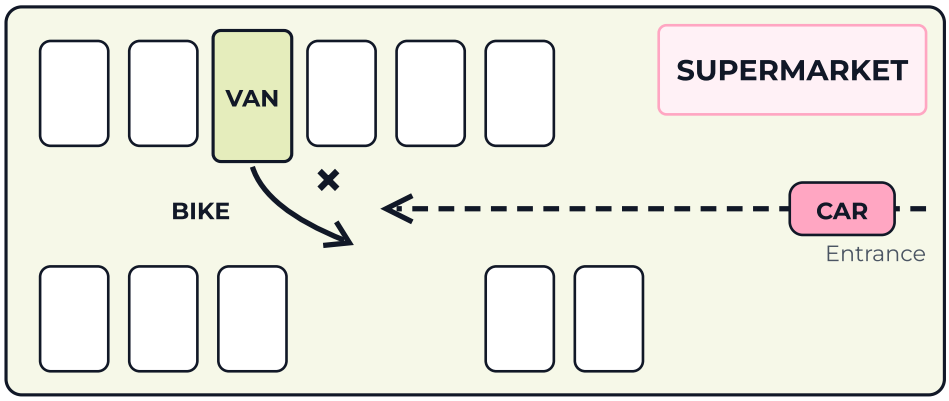
Check the rule: *while* goes with the long action. ~~I was reading while the phone rang.~~ → *While I was reading, the phone rang. When* can go with either.

ROUND	A: WHEN	A: WHILE	B: WHEN	B: WHILE
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				

ACTIVITY 5

The Accident Report

1. A small accident in a supermarket parking lot. Nobody is hurt. Cut out the two role cards. Partner A is the driver, Partner B is the cyclist.
2. Read your card in silence. Then take turns to tell the insurer your story, scene first: *I was driving very slowly. I was looking for a space when…*
3. The insurer is a third student. In a pair, ask each other: the driver asks the cyclist the six questions, then swap. Write short answers in the table.
4. Compare the two stories. Where do they disagree? Decide together who was more responsible, and why.



Partner A · The driver

You were driving into the supermarket parking lot on Saturday afternoon. It was raining. You were driving slowly and looking for a space. A cyclist came out from behind a white van and touched the front of your car.

YOUR SECRET

Your phone was in your hand. You were checking your shopping list. Say this only if the insurer asks you directly.

Partner B · The cyclist

You were riding home from work through the supermarket parking lot. It was starting to rain. You came out from behind a white van, and a car hit your back wheel. You fell, but you were not hurt.

YOUR SECRET

You were listening to music with one earphone, and you were riding quite fast. Say this only if the insurer asks you directly.

THE INSURER ASKS	THE DRIVER SAYS	THE CYCLIST SAYS
Where were you going?		
What were you doing when you first saw the other person?		
How fast were you going?		
What were you holding?		
What was the weather doing?		
What happened next?		

The case is decided by the scene. Keep asking what each person *was doing* before the accident, not only what happened.

ACTIVITY 6

Same Moment, Two People

1. Cut out the eight moment cards and put them face down.
2. Partner A takes a card and climbs the ladder: four sentences, one on each step. Partner B ticks each step that has the right tense.
3. Partner B then asks about one more person in that place: *And what was your neighbor doing?*
4. Swap after each card. Card 8 is a real moment from this week. Which home sounded busiest?

1 **Saturday, 7 p.m.** your kitchen	2 **Monday, 8 a.m.** your front door	3 **Last night, 11 p.m.** your living room	4 **Sunday, noon** your street
5 **Friday, 6 p.m.** your workplace	6 **New Year's Eve, 11:59 p.m.** wherever you were	7 **Your last birthday, 9 p.m.** the place you were celebrating	8 **A real moment from this week** you choose the time and place

1. I was ____ing … what you were doing ☐
2. My ____ was ____ing … what another person was doing ☐
3. While I was ____ing, my ____ was ____ing … join the two scenes ☐
4. … and then ____ -ed. add one event in the past simple ☐

PEOPLE YOU CAN USE: my partner · my roommate · my son · my daughter · my neighbor · my mom · my colleague · the dog

A list or a scene? *While I cooked, he set the table.* is a list of two things. *While I was cooking, he was setting the table.* paints a picture of one moment.

Example: *While I was cooking, my husband was setting the table, and then the smoke alarm went off.*

ACTIVITY 8

Slow Motion Replay

YOU NEED a phone timer

1. Cut out the ten disaster cards and put them face down. Partner A takes one.
2. Tell it like a sports commentator replaying a goal. Before the disaster, every sentence is past continuous. Use the five steps to build the scene.
3. Partner B times you with a phone. You may not say the disaster until **45 seconds** have passed. Partner B ticks each step you used.
4. Then say it in one past simple sentence: *Then I tripped.* One point for each tick. A past simple before the disaster loses a point. Swap.

1 You spilled coffee on your laptop.	2 You missed your train by one second.	3 You sent a message to the wrong person.	4 You walked into a glass door.	5 You locked your keys in the car.
6 You called your boss “Mom.”	7 You sat on a freshly painted bench.	8 You fell asleep in a meeting.	9 You dropped your phone into a lake.	10 You waved at a stranger who wasn't waving at you.

BUILD THE SCENE, STEP BY STEP

- (1) Where were you going? ☐
- (2) What were you holding or carrying? ☐
- (3) Who else was there, and what were they doing? ☐
- (4) What were you thinking about? ☐
- (5) What was the weather, the room or the music doing? ☐
- (!) **THEN... the disaster, in the past simple**

Example: *I was walking down the corridor. I was holding my coffee in one hand and my laptop in the other. My manager was coming the other way, and she was smiling. I was smiling back. Then I tripped.*

BONUS

Fix the Witness Statement

1. Work in pairs. This is the driver's statement for the insurer in activity 5. It has **eight** mistakes with the past simple and past continuous.
2. Read the four kinds of mistakes in the box. Underline each mistake in the statement and write the right form above it.
3. Check at the bottom of the page. One point for each mistake you found and fixed. Then read the statement aloud to your partner, correctly.

State verbs	**One thing after another**	**While with the short event**	**The missing scene**
know, want, have (own) and like don't usually take -ing. ~~I was knowing~~ → I knew	A sequence of events needs the past simple. ~~He was getting up, was picking up~~ → got up, picked up	*While* goes with the long action. ~~While he asked~~ → When he asked	An action in progress needs the past continuous. ~~I drove … when~~ → I was driving … when

STATEMENT OF THE DRIVER · SATURDAY, 4:15 P.M.

I was knowing this parking lot well, because I shop at the supermarket every Saturday. That afternoon it was raining, and there were not many free spaces. I drove very slowly between the cars when a cyclist suddenly came out from behind a white van. I was hitting the brakes at once, but the front of my car touched his back wheel. The cyclist fell. He was getting up, was picking up his bike and came to my window. He was angry, and he was wanting my phone number. While he asked for it, I noticed that he was wearing an earphone. When the police arrived ten minutes later, I still sat in my car.

Mistakes found ☐ **/ 8**

Your turn

Now write the cyclist's statement in four sentences: what was happening, what happened, and what happened next.

Answers: **1** was knowing → knew **2** drove → was driving **3** was hitting → hit **4** was getting → got **5** was picking → picked **6** was wanting → wanted **7** While → When **8** still sat → was still sitting