
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

The Grammar Gameshow

The past continuous

The logo for BBC Learning English, featuring the letters 'BBC' in a white box above the words 'LEARNING ENGLISH' in white text on a teal background.**Will**

Hello and welcome to the Grammar Gameshow! I'm your host, Will! – but I'll change for person and time! And of course, let's not forget Leslie, our all-knowing voice in the sky.

Leslie

Welcome, everyone!

Will

Tonight we're going to be asking three questions about...

Leslie

The past continuous tense!

Will

OK! Now, let's meet our contestants!

Helen

Hi everyone. I'm Helen!

Will

Contestant number 2?

Greg

Hi, everyone. I'm Greg!

Will

Welcome back Helen! Ok. Let's get going, and don't forget you can play along at home too. Our first round is a battle round. Contestants ask each other questions about the past continuous until one of them makes a mistake. Helen do you want to start?

Helen

Yes, please!

Will

That's a shame! Greg, you can go first...

Greg

Oh! Right! What is the formula for the past continuous?

Helen

'Was' or 'were' + 'verbING'. Ha ha! What do we use the past continuous for?

Greg

Actions which are in progress at a past time. Ha ha - yes! Give me an example.

Helen

I was eating dinner at 6pm last night. Ha ha! Do we use the past continuous with state verbs?

Greg

No, not usually. Ha ha – yes! Do we usually use the past continuous with repeated actions?

Helen

Yes!

Will

Oh! That was vicious! Well played, but Helen, you made a mistake there. Leslie?

Leslie

Mostly right! The past continuous is used to describe actions that were in progress at a past time. It is constructed with 'was' or 'were' and 'verbING' - and, being continuous, it does not usually use state verbs. However, it does not usually describe repeated actions or habits either. Sorry Helen, that's the past simple.

Will

Sorry Helen. 20 points to Greg. Let's move on to our next round. Which of these sentences is incorrect and why?

- a) I was walking when I tripped and fell.
- b) I was walking while I tripped and fell.
- c) When I was walking, I tripped and fell.
- d) While I was walking, I tripped and fell.

Greg

Trick question! They are all correct.

Helen

No, no. B is wrong – we don't use 'while' for quick actions. Ha ha!

Will

Wow. You two are really getting into it! Leslie?

Leslie

We often use the past continuous and past simple together to describe a longer action that is interrupted by a short one. These actions are connected with time words like 'when' and 'while'. However, we do not usually use 'while' in front of the short action. So, well done Helen.

Will

Well done Helen. 20 points for you! This is exciting. It's neck and neck! It's time for our final question. True or false: The past continuous can make you sound more polite.

Helen

True!

Will

It is true! Can you explain how?

Helen

No?

Will

Greg?

Greg

Using the past continuous makes things more polite because it seems temporary and so more casual.

Will

Leslie?

Leslie

Yep. Using the past continuous can make sentences seem more polite by distancing them from the present – this makes them sound more tentative and less assertive. More gentle. For example – 'I was hoping you could lend me money' is more polite than 'I hope you can lend me money'.

Will

Well, this is tricky. Helen, you said it was true, and Greg, you explained it. Who do I give the points to?

Greg

You should give it to me!

Helen

No, I was the one who answered the question!

Greg

No you didn't. I got it right. You should give it to me!

Helen

Oh rubbish!

Will

I know! Wasn't that easier? And that brings us to the end of today's Grammar Gameshow. And the winner is...me! Well done! Thank you! What have I won?

Leslie

Cash in mixed currency!

Will

It looks like we'll need two more contestants. Thanks for joining us. Say goodbye Leslie

Leslie

Goodbye Leslie

Will

See you next time.