DESCRIBING PAST EVENTS

Narrative: 1. Main events

The past simple is used to describe **finished events** in the past, one thing happening after another.

*Susan went into the station and bought a ticket.*

2. Background description

The past continuous is used to describe **actions still in progress** (when we were in the middle of doing st.), and is used for **background description** (*while, when, just as*).

*Just as I was leaving the house, the phone rang.*

There were a lot of people waiting in the station. Some were sleeping on the benches, and others were walking up and down. *Sarah was looking for Graham so she didn’t sit down.*

3. Past before past

The past perfect is used to describe a past event which took place before another past event. Past simple (*arrived*) is the **starting point** of the story.

*By the time the train arrived, Susan had managed to push her way to the front of the crowd.*

(Note: *Had done* is the past of *have done*.

*Who is that woman? I’ve never seen her before.*

*I didn’t know who she was. I’d never seen her before*)

It is not always necessary if a time expression makes the order of events clear.

*Before the train arrived, Susan managed to push her way to the front of the crowd.*

WATCH OUT! The patient *died*. The doctor *arrived*.

The patient *died* when the doctor *arrived*.

The patient *had died* when the doctor *arrived*. 
The doctor **arrived** quickly, but the patient **had already** died.

**Past perfect continuous** is used to describe a **period of time** before something else happened.

At last the bus came. I **had been waiting** for twenty minutes.

It wasn’t raining when we went out. The sun was shining. But it **had been raining**, so the ground was wet.

4. **Interrupted past continuous**

We often contrast an action still in progress with a sudden event which interrupts it.

While Susan **was trying** to get onto the platform, a man **grabbed** her handbag.

5. **Participle clauses**

are introduced by the time expressions **before, after and while**. They have the **same subject** as the following clause.

After struggling with him, Susan **pulled** the bag from his hands.

**Habits in the past:**

1. **Past simple**

is used to describe **past habits or states**. A time expression is usually necessary.

I **always got up** at six those days. (HABIT)

I **lived** in Australia for several years. (STATE)

2. **Used to**

is used to describe **past habits**, usually in contrast with the present. A time expression in NOT necessary.

I **used to get up** at six, but now I get up at eight.
Used to can also describe past states.

I used to own a horse. (I owned a horse once.)

Note these forms of used to: I didn’t use to like beer.

Did you use to swim every day?

3. Would

is used to describe a person’s typical activities in the past. It can only be used to describe repeated actions, and is mainly used in writing, and in personal reminiscences.

Every evening was the same. Jack would turn on the radio, light his pipe and fall asleep.

4. Past continuous

can be used to describe a repeated action in the past, often an annoying habit. A frequency adverb is necessary.

When Peter was younger, he was always lying.

Politeness and uncertainty

The past continuous with the verb wonder has a polite meaning.

I was wondering if you could help me.

With the verb think it suggests uncertainty.

I was thinking of having a party next week.