Past simple and continuous tenses

We use the past tense to talk about:

* something that happened **once in the past**:

*I****met****my wife in 1983.  
We****went****to Spain for our holidays.  
They****got****home very late last night.*

* something that happened **several times in the past**:

*When I was a boy, I****walked****a mile to school every day.  
We****swam****a lot while we were on holiday.  
They always****enjoyed****visiting their friends.*

* something that was **true for some time in the past**:

*I****lived****abroad for ten years.  
He****enjoyed****being a student.  
She****played****a lot of tennis when she was younger.*

* we often use **expressions with *ago***with the past simple:

*I****met****my wife****a long time ago****.*

We use the past continuous to talk about the past:

for something which happened in the middle of an action:

*The children* ***were doing*** *their homework when I* ***got*** *home.*

*Compare: The children did their homework when (= after) I got home.*

This use of the past continuous is very common at the beginning of a story:

*The other day I* ***was waiting*** *for a bus when …*

*Last week, as I* ***was driving*** *to work, …*

for something that happened before and after a specific time:

*It was eight o'clock. I* ***was writing*** *a letter.*

*Compare: At eight o'clock I wrote (= started writing) some letters.*

to show that something continued for some time:

*My head* ***was aching****.*

*Everyone* ***was shouting****.*

for something that happened again and again:

*I* ***was practising*** *every day, three times a day.*

*They* ***were meeting*** *secretly after school.*

*They were always quarrelling.*

with verbs which show change or growth:

*The children* ***were growing*** *up quickly.*

*Her English* ***was improving****.*

*My hair* ***was going*** *grey.*

*The town* ***was changing*** *quickly.*

to describe an action taking place when another occurred*.*

*While they* ***were p****ainting the door, I* ***was painting*** *the windows.*

We **do not normally use** the **past continuous** with **stative** **verbs**. We use the past simple instead:

*When I got home, I really needed (NOT was needing) a shower.*