

Narrative tenses - revision

Grammar Lesson, Examples & 30 Practice Questions

Narrative Tenses – Revision

When we tell a story or describe past events, we use a group of verb tenses called **narrative tenses**. These tenses work together to help the listener or reader understand *what happened*, *what was already happening*, *what had already finished*, and *how events are connected in time*.

In this lesson, we will revise the four main narrative tenses used in English storytelling:

- Past Simple
- Past Continuous
- Past Perfect Simple
- Past Perfect Continuous

Understanding how these tenses work together is essential for B2-level English. Let's look at a short story to see them all in action:

"When Maria **arrived** at the station, her train **had already left**. She **had been waiting** for the wrong platform. She **sat** down on a bench while she **was trying** to decide what to do next."

Each tense in that story is doing a specific job. By the end of this lesson, you will understand exactly what each one does and how to use them together correctly.

The Four Narrative Tenses

1. Past Simple

The **Past Simple** is the most common narrative tense. We use it to describe the **main events** of a story — actions that happened one after another, or at a specific time in the past.

Form:

Regular verbs: base verb + *-ed*

Irregular verbs: must be memorised (e.g. go → went, see → saw, buy → bought)

Examples:

She **opened** the door and **walked** into the room.

He **saw** a strange light in the sky.

They **decided** to leave early.

Think of the Past Simple as the *main thread* of your story — the sequence of events that drives the narrative forward.

Sentence Type	Form	Example
Affirmative	Subject + verb (past)	She walked to the park.
Negative	Subject + did not / didn't + base verb	She didn't walk to the park.
Question	Did + subject + base verb?	Did she walk to the park?

2. Past Continuous

The **Past Continuous** describes an action that was **in progress at a specific moment** in the past. In narratives, we use it to set the scene, describe background actions, or show that an action was interrupted.

Form:

Subject + *was / were* + verb + *-ing*

Examples:

It **was raining** heavily when we left the house.

She **was reading** a book when the phone rang.

The children **were playing** in the garden.

The Past Continuous often appears with the Past Simple to show that a longer background action (**Past Continuous**) was interrupted by a sudden event (**Past Simple**).

Pattern:

While / When + Past Continuous + Past Simple

→ I **was cooking** dinner **when** the fire alarm **went** off.

Sentence Type	Form	Example
Affirmative	Subject + was/were + verb-ing	He was sleeping when she called.
Negative	Subject + was/were + not + verb-ing	He wasn't sleeping .
Question	Was/Were + subject + verb-ing?	Was he sleeping ?

3. Past Perfect Simple

The **Past Perfect Simple** describes an action that was **completed before another past event**. It is used to show that something happened *earlier* in the story — further back in time than the main past events.

Form:

Subject + *had* + past participle

Examples:

When I arrived, the film **had already started**.

She **had never seen** snow before that winter.

He realised he **had forgotten** his wallet.

Think of the Past Perfect as a *step back in time*. You step back from the main story to explain something that happened before.

Common time expressions used with Past Perfect:

already, never, just, before, after, by the time, when, once

Sentence Type	Form	Example
Affirmative	Subject + had + past participle	They had left before she arrived.
Negative	Subject + had not/hadn't + past participle	She hadn't eaten anything.
Question	Had + subject + past participle?	Had they met before?

4. Past Perfect Continuous

The **Past Perfect Continuous** describes an action that was **in progress over a period of time before another past event**. It emphasises the *duration* of the earlier action, or it explains a result visible at a past moment.

Form:

Subject + *had been* + verb + *-ing*

Examples:

She was exhausted because she **had been working** all day.

It was obvious he **had been crying**.

They **had been waiting** for over an hour when the bus finally came.

The key idea is *duration* — this tense highlights how long something had been happening before a past event.

Sentence Type	Form	Example
Affirmative	Subject + had been + verb-ing	He had been studying for hours.
Negative	Subject + hadn't been + verb-ing	She hadn't been sleeping well.
Question	Had + subject + been + verb-ing?	Had they been arguing ?

How the Narrative Tenses Work Together

The real skill at B2 level is knowing how to **combine** narrative tenses within the same story. Each tense has a specific role:

Tense	Role in a Narrative	Example
Past Simple	Main events (in order)	She opened the envelope.

Tense	Role in a Narrative	Example
Past Continuous	Background / setting the scene / interrupted actions	It was snowing outside.
Past Perfect Simple	Earlier completed actions (before the main events)	Someone had opened it already.
Past Perfect Continuous	Duration of earlier actions / reasons for past situations	She had been worrying about it all week.

Example story using all four tenses together:

"Last night, Daniel **came** home very late. His flatmate **was watching** TV in the living room. Daniel **looked** tired — he **had been working** overtime for three days in a row. He **hadn't eaten** since lunchtime, so he **made** himself a sandwich and **went** straight to bed."

- **came, looked, made, went** → Past Simple (main events)
- **was watching** → Past Continuous (background action/scene-setting)
- **had been working** → Past Perfect Continuous (duration of an earlier activity)
- **hadn't eaten** → Past Perfect Simple (completed earlier situation)

Important Differences and Special Cases

When and While

Both **when** and **while** are used with narrative tenses, but they are not always interchangeable.

When is typically used with a short, completed action (Past Simple):

→ *The phone rang **when** she **walked** in.*

While is typically used with an ongoing action (Past Continuous):

→ ***While** she **was cooking**, the phone rang.*

However, **when** can also introduce a Past Continuous if it means "at the time that":

→ ***When** I **was living** in Paris, I met Jacques.*

Past Perfect Simple vs. Past Perfect Continuous

Both tenses refer to actions that happened before another past event. The difference is:

- **Past Perfect Simple** → focuses on the *completion* or *result* of an action
→ *She **had written** three reports before lunch.* (The reports were finished.)
- **Past Perfect Continuous** → focuses on the *duration* or *ongoing nature* of an action
→ *She **had been writing** reports all morning.* (Emphasis on how long.)

With verbs that describe states rather than actions (know, believe, love, want, understand), we generally use the **Past Perfect Simple**, not the continuous form.

→ *He **had known** her for years.* (Not: *had been knowing*)

Do You Always Need the Past Perfect?

If the order of events in the past is already clear — usually because of time words like **before** or **after** — the Past Perfect is sometimes optional.

→ She **left** before he **arrived**. (The order is clear, so Past Perfect is not essential.)

→ She **had left** before he **arrived**. (Also correct — slightly more formal/emphatic.)

However, without a clear time word, the Past Perfect is important to avoid confusion:

→ When I **got** to the cinema, the film **had started**. (The film started first — Past Perfect is needed here.)

Common Mistakes

✗ When I arrived at the party, everyone already left.

✓ When I arrived at the party, everyone **had already left**.

✗ She was reading a book when she had heard a noise.

✓ She **was reading a book when she heard a noise**.

✗ He had been working there since ten years before he retired.

✓ He **had been working there for ten years before he retired**.

✗ While I cooked dinner, the fire alarm went off.

✓ **While I was cooking dinner, the fire alarm went off**.

✗ They had been knowing each other for a long time.

✓ They **had known each other for a long time**.

✗ The lesson started when we were arriving.

✓ The **lesson had already started when we arrived**.

Key Signal Words for Each Narrative Tense

Certain words and phrases often signal which narrative tense to use. Learning these can help you choose the right tense quickly.

Tense	Common Signal Words / Phrases
Past Simple	then, suddenly, next, finally, after that, in the end, ago, last (week/year), at (time)
Past Continuous	while, when (+ background), at that moment, all day, all evening, at the time
Past Perfect Simple	already, never, just, by the time, before, after, once, when (for earlier action)
Past Perfect Continuous	for, since, all day, how long, before, because (showing reason/duration)

Narrative Tenses – Quick Summary

Here is a quick overview of the four narrative tenses and their main uses:

- **Past Simple** → the main events of a story, actions in sequence
- **Past Continuous** → background actions, scene-setting, actions in progress that were interrupted
- **Past Perfect Simple** → actions completed before other past events; stepping back in time
- **Past Perfect Continuous** → duration of actions before another past event; explaining reasons for past situations

Remember that these tenses are designed to work **together**. A well-written narrative will typically combine two or more of them to create a clear, natural story with a strong sense of timing and sequence.

Key points to remember:

- Use **Past Continuous** with *while* for background actions; use **Past Simple** with *when* for sudden or completed events.
- Use **Past Perfect** to make the order of past events absolutely clear.
- Use **Past Perfect Continuous** when you want to stress how long something had been happening.
- Do not use continuous forms with state verbs such as *know, love, believe, understand*.

Now practise **narrative tenses** in the exercises below.

Narrative tenses - revision – Practice Test

B2 | 30 Questions: Multiple Choice, Fill-in-the-Gap & Fill-in-the-Blank

Part 1: Multiple Choice (Questions 1–10)

1 By the time the ambulance arrived, the injured man ____ unconscious for nearly ten minutes.

- A** was
- B** had been
- C** has been
- D** were

2 When I finally got home, I realised I ____ my keys at the office.

- A** left
- B** had left
- C** was leaving
- D** have left

3 She ____ quietly at her desk when the fire alarm suddenly went off.

- A** worked
- B** had worked
- C** was working
- D** has worked

4 The storm ____ for three days before it finally calmed down.

- A** has raged
- B** raged
- C** had been raging
- D** was raging

5 No sooner ____ he sat down than the phone rang.

- A** had
- B** did
- C** was
- D** has

6 They ____ the old farmhouse into a hotel, and it looked completely different from what I remembered.

- A** were converting
- B** converted
- C** have converted
- D** had converted

7 While the children ____ in the garden, their mother prepared dinner inside.

- A** played
- B** had played
- C** were playing
- D** have played

8 I didn't recognise the town because they ____ down the old market and built a shopping centre.

- A** tore
- B** were tearing
- C** had torn
- D** tear

9 She had been waiting for over an hour when he ____ to apologise.

- A** was calling
- B** had called
- C** called
- D** calls

10 As soon as the guests ____, the host opened a bottle of champagne.

- A** had arrived
- B** arrived
- C** were arriving
- D** have arrived

Part 2: Fill in the Gap (Questions 11–20)

11 By the time the fire brigade arrived, the building ____ completely to the ground.

- A** had burned
- B** burned
- C** was burning

12 While Laura ____ dinner, the phone rang suddenly.

- A** was preparing
- B** prepared
- C** had prepared

13 I noticed that someone ____ into my office and moved things around.

- A** had been
- B** was
- C** is

14 The children ____ in the garden all afternoon when it suddenly started to rain.

- A** had been playing
- B** played
- C** were playing

15 As soon as she ____ the letter, she burst into tears.

- A** had read
- B** was reading
- C** reads

16 He ____ for the company for ten years before he finally got promoted.

- A** had been working
- B** has been working
- C** worked

17 The two friends ____ each other for years and then ran into each other by chance.

- A** hadn't seen
- B** didn't see
- C** weren't seeing

18 The detective realised that the suspect ____ at the time of the crime.

- A** had been lying
- B** lied
- C** has been lying

19 Just as I ____ to leave the office, my boss called me back.

- A** was about
- B** had been
- C** would be

20 They ____ for nearly an hour before they realised they were on the wrong road.

- A** had been driving
- B** drove
- C** have been driving

Part 3: Fill in the Blank (Questions 21–30)

21 By the time the police arrived, the thieves _____ through the back door.

22 She _____ a novel when the lights suddenly went out.

23 I realised I _____ my passport at the hotel, so I had to go back.

24 While the chef _____ dinner, his assistant sliced the vegetables.

25 They _____ for three days before they finally reached the village.

26 As soon as she _____ the news, she burst into tears.

27 He _____ at the company for ten years when he was offered a promotion.

28 The children _____ in the garden all afternoon while their parents prepared for the party.

29 Nobody noticed that the window _____ until the morning.

30 He walked into the room and immediately saw that someone _____ his things.

Answer Key & Explanations

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Part 1: Multiple Choice

1. **B** Correct Answer: had been ✓ Explanation: We use the past perfect continuous (had been + -ing) to describe an action that started before another past event and was still ongoing at that point. Here, had been unconscious shows the duration of a state that preceded the ambulance's arrival.
2. **B** Correct Answer: had left ✓ Explanation: The past perfect (had + past participle) is used for an action that happened before another past action. Leaving the keys happened before the moment of realisation, so had left is correct.
3. **C** Correct Answer: was working ✓ Explanation: The past continuous (was/were + -ing) describes a background action in progress when a sudden event (introduced by when) interrupted it. She was working sets the scene for the alarm going off.
4. **C** Correct Answer: had been raging ✓ Explanation: The past perfect continuous emphasises the duration of an activity that continued up to a specific point in the past. Had been raging for three days shows how long the storm lasted before it calmed.
5. **A** Correct Answer: had ✓ Explanation: The fixed expression No sooner ... than requires inversion with the past perfect: No sooner had he sat down than It means one past action happened immediately after another.
6. **D** Correct Answer: had converted ✓ Explanation: The past perfect is used here because the conversion was completed before the narrator's observation in the past (it looked different). Had converted correctly places the action earlier in the timeline.
7. **C** Correct Answer: were playing ✓ Explanation: While introduces a background action in progress, so we use the past continuous. Were playing describes what the children were doing simultaneously as their mother prepared dinner.
8. **C** Correct Answer: had torn ✓ Explanation: The past perfect explains a past situation by referring to an event that happened even earlier. The demolition and construction (had torn down ... and built) occurred before the narrator's visit, explaining why the town looked unrecognisable.
9. **C** Correct Answer: called ✓ Explanation: When a past perfect continuous clause describes a prolonged background action, the simple past is used for the event that ended it. Called is the simple past that marks the point when the waiting stopped.
10. **B** Correct Answer: arrived ✓ Explanation: After as soon as in a narrative context, the simple past is typically used for both clauses to show that one action followed immediately after another. Arrived ... opened clearly sequences the two events.

Part 2: Fill in the Gap

11. **A** Correct Answer: had burned ✓ Explanation: We use the past perfect to show that one past action was completed before another past action. By the time is a key signal. By the time they arrived, the building had burned down.
12. **A** Correct Answer: was preparing ✓ Explanation: We use the past continuous for a longer action in progress when a shorter action (simple past) interrupts it. While introduces the background action. While she was preparing dinner, the phone rang.
13. **A** Correct Answer: had been ✓ Explanation: The past perfect is used here because the intrusion happened before the moment of noticing. Had been links the earlier event to the past moment of discovery.
14. **A** Correct Answer: had been playing ✓ Explanation: The past perfect continuous emphasises the duration of an activity that was in progress before another past event. All afternoon signals duration. They had been playing all afternoon when it rained.
15. **A** Correct Answer: had read ✓ Explanation: After as soon as, the past perfect can be used to show one action was completed immediately before the next. Had read signals the reading was finished before the reaction occurred.
16. **A** Correct Answer: had been working ✓ Explanation: The past perfect continuous shows a continuous activity over a period of time leading up to a past event. Before he got promoted anchors us in the past, so has been working (present perfect) is incorrect.
17. **A** Correct Answer: hadn't seen ✓ Explanation: The past perfect negative (hadn't seen) describes a situation that had not occurred over a period before a specific past moment. Then ran into confirms the reference point is in the past.
18. **A** Correct Answer: had been lying ✓ Explanation: The past perfect continuous describes an ongoing action or state that was happening before the past reference point (realised). It implies the lying was a continuous process leading up to that moment.
19. **A** Correct Answer: was about ✓ Explanation: The structure was about to + infinitive expresses an action that was on the point of happening in the past. It is a common narrative device to show an imminent action that was interrupted. I was about to leave when he called.
20. **A** Correct Answer: had been driving ✓ Explanation: The past perfect continuous highlights the duration of an activity (nearly an hour) before another past event (realised). Have been driving is a present perfect form and cannot be used for purely past contexts.

Part 3: Fill in the Blank

21. **had escaped|had already escaped** Correct Answer: had escaped / had already escaped ✓ Explanation: We use the past perfect to show that one past action happened before another past action. The thieves escaped before the police arrived, so had escaped is correct.
22. **was reading** Correct Answer: was reading ✓ Explanation: We use the past continuous for a longer action that was in progress when a shorter action interrupted it. Was reading describes the background activity interrupted by went out.
23. **had left** Correct Answer: had left ✓ Explanation: The past perfect (had left) is used here because leaving the passport happened earlier than the moment of realisation, which is already in the past.
24. **was preparing** Correct Answer: was preparing ✓ Explanation: The past continuous (was preparing) describes a longer, ongoing background action happening at the same time as another past action (sliced).
25. **had been travelling** Correct Answer: had been travelling ✓ Explanation: The past perfect continuous emphasises the duration of an action that was ongoing up to a point in the past. Three days of travel led up to their arrival.
26. **heard** Correct Answer: heard ✓ Explanation: After as soon as, we use the simple past when both actions happened in quick succession. Heard and burst are both simple past verbs describing a sequence of completed events.
27. **had been working** Correct Answer: had been working ✓ Explanation: The past perfect continuous (had been working) is used to show how long an activity had been in progress before another past event occurred. The focus is on the duration of the work.
28. **were playing** Correct Answer: were playing ✓ Explanation: The past continuous (were playing) describes an ongoing background activity over a period of time in the past, running parallel to another activity (prepared).
29. **had been broken** Correct Answer: had been broken ✓ Explanation: The past perfect passive (had been broken) is used because the window was broken at an earlier, unspecified time before it was noticed. The focus is on the result, not the agent.
30. **had moved** Correct Answer: had moved ✓ Explanation: The past perfect (had moved) indicates that moving the things happened before he walked in. It establishes a clear sequence of two past events.

Score Guide

27–30 Correct	Excellent! You have mastered this topic.
23–26 Correct	Very good! Review the rules you missed.
18–22 Correct	Good start. Re-read the lesson and examples.
0–17 Correct	Study the lesson again before retaking the test.