

Past Perfect Continuous

Grammar Lesson, Examples & 30 Practice Questions

Past Perfect Continuous

The **past perfect continuous** is a verb tense we use to talk about an action that was *in progress* for a period of time before another moment or event in the past. It helps us show duration — how long something had been happening — and often explains a result or situation we found in the past.

Think of it this way: two things happened in the past. One action started first and continued for some time. Then something else happened, or we simply notice the result. The past perfect continuous describes that *first, ongoing action*.

Simple examples:

- She **had been waiting** for two hours when the train finally arrived.
- His eyes were red because he **had been crying**.
- They **had been working** all day, so they were exhausted.

In this lesson, you will learn exactly how to form the past perfect continuous, when to use it, how it is different from related tenses, and the most common mistakes to avoid.

Forming the Past Perfect Continuous

The **past perfect continuous** is formed with three parts:

Subject + had + been + verb-ing

This structure never changes, regardless of the subject. Whether you use *I, she, they, or the students*, the formula stays the same.

Positive (Affirmative) Sentences

Subject	had	been	Verb + -ing	Full Example
I	had	been	working	I had been working for six hours.
You	had	been	studying	You had been studying all morning.
He / She / It	had	been	running	She had been running for an hour.
We	had	been	travelling	We had been travelling since dawn.
They	had	been	arguing	They had been arguing all week.

Note on spelling: The *-ing* ending follows the same spelling rules as all continuous tenses. For example: *run* → *running* (double the final consonant), *make* → *making* (drop the silent e), *study* → *studying* (no change to the y).

Negative Sentences

To make a negative sentence, add **not** after *had*:

Subject + had not + been + verb-ing

Subject	Full Form	Contraction	Example
I	had not been	hadn't been	I hadn't been sleeping well.
You	had not been	hadn't been	You hadn't been paying attention.
He / She / It	had not been	hadn't been	He hadn't been feeling well.
We	had not been	hadn't been	We hadn't been living there long.
They	had not been	hadn't been	They hadn't been expecting the news.

Questions

To form a question, move **had** to the beginning of the sentence:

Had + subject + been + verb-ing + ?

Type	Structure	Example
Yes/No question	Had + subject + been + verb-ing?	Had she been working there long?
Yes/No question	Had + subject + been + verb-ing?	Had they been waiting long?
Wh- question	Wh- word + had + subject + been + verb-ing?	How long had you been studying?
Wh- question	Wh- word + had + subject + been + verb-ing?	What had he been doing before you arrived?

Short Answers to Questions

For yes/no questions, use short answers with *had* or *hadn't*:

- *Had she been waiting long?* → **Yes, she had.** / **No, she hadn't.**
- *Had they been arguing?* → **Yes, they had.** / **No, they hadn't.**

When to Use the Past Perfect Continuous

There are three main situations where we use the **past perfect continuous**. Each one focuses on an action that was ongoing in the past and had some connection to a later moment.

1. Duration of an Activity Before a Past Moment

Use the past perfect continuous to show **how long** something had been happening up to a specific point in the past. Time expressions like *for*, *since*, *all day*, *all morning*, and *for hours* are very common here.

- By the time the doctor arrived, he **had been waiting** for over three hours.
- She **had been living** in Paris for five years before she moved to Berlin.
- They **had been building** the bridge since January when the project was cancelled.
- I **had been trying** to call her all afternoon before I finally got through.

2. Explaining a Visible Result in the Past

Sometimes we see or notice a result in the past, and we use the past perfect continuous to explain the *cause* — the activity that had been going on and produced that result.

- Her hands were dirty because she **had been gardening**.
- He was out of breath because he **had been running**.
- The children were exhausted because they **had been playing** outside all day.
- The kitchen smelled wonderful because she **had been baking** all afternoon.

3. An Ongoing Background Activity Before Another Past Event

The past perfect continuous can also describe an activity that was happening as a background context when another, more sudden event occurred.

- We **had been driving** for two hours when the tyre burst.
- I **had been reading** the report when my manager called me in.
- They **had been negotiating** for months when the deal finally collapsed.

Time Expressions Commonly Used with the Past Perfect Continuous

Certain words and phrases naturally appear alongside the past perfect continuous. Learning these will help you recognise and use the tense more confidently.

Time Expression	Use	Example
for + period of time	Duration of the activity	She had been working for three hours.
since + point in time	Starting point of the activity	He had been living there since 2010.
all day / all morning / all week	Extended duration	They had been arguing all morning.
before	Shows what happened first	I had been saving money before I quit.
by the time	Deadline or moment of reference	By the time he arrived, we had been waiting for an hour.

Time Expression	Use	Example
when	A second past event interrupts or follows	We had been driving for hours when it started to snow.
how long	Asking about duration	How long had she been studying before the exam?

Contractions in the Past Perfect Continuous

In spoken English and informal writing, we often shorten *had* to **'d**. This contraction sounds identical for all subjects, so listen carefully to the context.

Full Form	Contraction	Example
I had been	I'd been	I'd been hoping to hear from her.
You had been	You'd been	You'd been working too hard.
He had been	He'd been	He'd been feeling unwell all week.
She had been	She'd been	She'd been waiting for an hour.
We had been	We'd been	We'd been travelling since Tuesday.
They had been	They'd been	They'd been planning it for months.
had not been	hadn't been	She hadn't been sleeping well.

Tip: Be careful with *'d* — it can also be a contraction of *would*. For example, *I'd go* means *I would go*, not *I had been going*. The past perfect continuous always has *'d been + verb-ing*, so look for that *been* to confirm the tense.

Important Differences: Past Perfect Continuous vs. Related Tenses

Past Perfect Continuous vs. Past Perfect Simple

Both tenses look back from a point in the past, but they focus on different things.

Tense	Focus	Example
Past Perfect Simple	Completion of an action before a past moment	She had written three reports before lunch.
Past Perfect Continuous	Duration or ongoing nature of an action before a past moment	She had been writing reports all morning.

Tense	Focus	Example
Past Perfect Simple	The result or finished state matters	He had read the book before the film came out.
Past Perfect Continuous	The process or activity itself matters	He had been reading for hours when she called.

Ask yourself: Am I focusing on *how long* something was happening, or on *the fact that it was completed*? If duration and process are important, choose the **past perfect continuous**. If completion and result are important, choose the **past perfect simple**.

Past Perfect Continuous vs. Past Continuous

Tense	Focus	Example
Past Continuous	An action in progress at a specific moment in the past	She was working at 9 o'clock.
Past Perfect Continuous	An action that had been in progress up to a point in the past (emphasising duration and the connection to a later event)	She had been working since early morning when I arrived.

Stative Verbs: Do Not Use the Continuous Form

Just like other continuous tenses, the **past perfect continuous cannot be used with stative verbs** — verbs that describe states rather than actions. These include verbs of thinking, feeling, possession, and perception.

Common stative verbs: *know, believe, understand, want, need, love, hate, like, own, belong, seem, appear, contain, mean*.

- ✗ She had been knowing him for years.
✓ **She had known him for years.** (Use past perfect simple instead.)
- ✗ They had been wanting to leave.
✓ **They had wanted to leave.**
- ✗ He had been understanding the problem.
✓ **He had understood the problem.**

Important: Some verbs can be either stative or active depending on meaning. For example, *think* as a mental state (*I had been thinking = I was considering*) can be used in the continuous when it means the process of actively considering something.

Common Mistakes

- ✗ She had been worked all day.
✓ **She had been working all day.** (Always use *verb-ing*, not the past participle, after *had been*.)
- ✗ They was been waiting for an hour.
✓ **They had been waiting for an hour.** (Always use *had*, not *was/were*, in the past perfect continuous.)

- ✗ He had been work there since March.
- ✓ **He had been working there since March.** (Do not forget the *-ing* ending on the main verb.)
- ✗ I have been waiting for two hours before she arrived.
- ✓ **I had been waiting for two hours before she arrived.** (Use *had been*, not *have been*, when referring to a time before another past event.)
- ✗ Had she been waited long?
- ✓ **Had she been waiting long?** (Use the *-ing* form in questions, not the past participle.)
- ✗ He had been knowing her for years.
- ✓ **He had known her for years.** (Stative verbs like *know* are not used in continuous forms.)
- ✗ They hadn't been wait for long.
- ✓ **They hadn't been waiting for long.** (Always add *-ing* to the main verb.)
- ✗ By the time I called, she had been already leave.
- ✓ **By the time I called, she had already left.** (With completed actions, use past perfect simple, not continuous.)

Past Perfect Continuous: Quick Summary

The **past perfect continuous** is used to describe an action that was *in progress* for a period of time before another moment or event in the past. It emphasises **duration**, **process**, and the **connection between a past activity and its result or a later event**.

- **Form:** Subject + *had + been + verb-ing*
- **Negative:** Subject + *had not / hadn't + been + verb-ing*
- **Question:** *Had + subject + been + verb-ing?*
- **Use 1:** To show how long an activity had been happening before a past moment (*for, since, all day*).
- **Use 2:** To explain a visible result in the past (*She was tired because she had been working all night*).
- **Use 3:** To describe an ongoing background activity before another past event.
- **Key difference from past perfect simple:** Focus on *duration and process*, not just completion.
- **Never use** stative verbs (*know, want, love, etc.*) in the continuous form.

Now practise the **past perfect continuous** in the exercises below.

Past Perfect Continuous – 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 doctors ____ for over an hour.

- A** had been working
- B** have been working
- C** were working
- D** had worked

2 She was exhausted because she ____ all day without a break.

- A** has been studying
- B** had studied
- C** had been studying
- D** was studying

3 How long ____ before you finally got the job offer?

- A** had you been waiting
- B** were you waiting
- C** have you been waiting
- D** did you wait

4 The ground was wet because it ____ heavily the night before.

- A** had rained
- B** had been raining
- C** was raining
- D** has been raining

5 They ____ for three hours when the train finally arrived at the station.

- A** have waited
- B** had been waiting
- C** were waiting
- D** had waited

6 Mark's hands were dirty because he ____ his car.

- A** has been repairing
- B** had been repairing
- C** repaired
- D** was repairing

7 She ____ English for five years before she moved to London.

- A** studied
- B** had been studying
- C** was studying
- D** has studied

8 Which sentence uses the Past Perfect Continuous correctly?

- A** She had been know him for years.
- B** They had been playing football when it rained.
- C** He has been working there since 2010.
- D** I was being tired all morning.

9 The children were tired because they ____ in the garden all afternoon.

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

10 He realized he ____ in the wrong direction for almost twenty minutes.

- A** drove
- B** had driven
- C** had been driving
- D** was driving

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

11 By the time the rescue team arrived, the hikers ____ for over twelve hours in the freezing cold.

- A** had been waiting
- B** have been waiting
- C** were waiting

12 She was exhausted because she ____ all night to finish the project.

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

13 The ground was wet because it ____ heavily for several hours.

- A** had been raining
- B** has been raining
- C** rained

14 How long ____ before he finally received a job offer?

- A** had he been searching
- B** has he been searching
- C** did he search

15 They ____ for the missing documents for two days when they finally found them in the archive.

- A** had been looking
- B** were looking
- C** have been looking

16 I could tell from her red eyes that she ____ for a long time.

- A** had been crying
- B** was crying
- C** had cried

17 The athletes ____ intensively for six months before the championship finally took place.

- A** had been training
- B** trained
- C** had trained

18 He ____ the same song on repeat for hours before his roommate asked him to stop.

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

19 By the time I got to the meeting, the team ____ the issue for quite a while.

- A** had been discussing
- B** discussed
- C** were discussing

20 She ____ Spanish for two years before she moved to Madrid.

- A** had been studying
- B** studied
- C** has been studying

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

21 By the time the ambulance arrived, the doctors _____ the patient for over an hour.

22 She was exhausted because she _____ on the project all night.

23 They _____ for hours before they finally reached an agreement.

24 How long _____ before the train finally arrived?

25 The ground was wet because it _____ heavily all morning.

26 He admitted that he _____ the truth from his colleagues for months.

27 By the time we sat down for dinner, the chef _____ for three hours.

28 I could tell she had been crying because her eyes _____ red and swollen.

29 The athletes _____ intensively for two years before they competed in the Olympics.

30 She hadn't been sleeping well, so she _____ medication to help her rest.

Answer Key & Explanations

Past Perfect Continuous | B2

Part 1: Multiple Choice

1. **A** Correct Answer: had been working ✓ Explanation: The Past Perfect Continuous (had been + -ing) is used to show an action that was in progress for a period of time before another past event. Had been working emphasizes the duration up to the moment the ambulance arrived.
2. **C** Correct Answer: had been studying ✓ Explanation: We use the Past Perfect Continuous to explain the cause of a past state. Had been studying shows the ongoing activity that caused her exhaustion, emphasizing duration before the past result.
3. **A** Correct Answer: had you been waiting ✓ Explanation: Questions about duration before a past event use had + subject + been + -ing. The phrase how long signals that we need the Past Perfect Continuous to ask about an ongoing action before a specific past moment.
4. **B** Correct Answer: had been raining ✓ Explanation: Had been raining highlights that the rain was an ongoing process over a period before the past result (wet ground). While had rained is possible, had been raining better emphasizes the continuous nature of the action.
5. **B** Correct Answer: had been waiting ✓ Explanation: The expression for three hours combined with when the train finally arrived signals that an action was in progress for a duration up to a past point. The Past Perfect Continuous (had been waiting) is the correct choice.
6. **B** Correct Answer: had been repairing ✓ Explanation: The Past Perfect Continuous is used when a past ongoing activity explains a visible past result. Had been repairing explains WHY Mark's hands were dirty, showing the action was ongoing before that past moment.
7. **B** Correct Answer: had been studying ✓ Explanation: For five years and before she moved indicate a continuous action with duration that happened before another past event. The Past Perfect Continuous (had been studying) is used for this structure.
8. **B** Correct Answer: They had been playing football when it rained. ✓ Explanation: This sentence correctly uses had been + verb-ing to show an action in progress before another past event (when it rained). The other options use incorrect verb forms — know is a stative verb and cannot be used in continuous forms.
9. **B** Correct Answer: had been playing ✓ Explanation: Had been playing shows a continuous activity over a period (all afternoon) that caused a past result (being tired). This is a classic use of the Past Perfect Continuous to show cause and effect in the past.
10. **C** Correct Answer: had been driving ✓ Explanation: For almost twenty minutes indicates a continuous duration before the past moment of realization (he realized). The Past Perfect Continuous (had been driving) emphasizes that the action was ongoing throughout that time period.

Part 2: Fill in the Gap

11. **A** Correct Answer: had been waiting ✓ Explanation: We use the Past Perfect Continuous (had been + -ing) to show an action that was ongoing up to a specific point in the past. By the time signals that the waiting happened continuously before the team arrived. They had been waiting for over twelve hours.
12. **A** Correct Answer: had been working ✓ Explanation: The Past Perfect Continuous emphasizes the duration of an activity (all night) that caused a result (exhaustion) in the past. She had been working all night explains why she was tired.
13. **A** Correct Answer: had been raining ✓ Explanation: The Past Perfect Continuous is used to explain a past result (the ground was wet) caused by an ongoing past action. Had been raining shows the rain was continuous before the moment described.
14. **A** Correct Answer: had he been searching ✓ Explanation: Questions with How long in the Past Perfect Continuous use had + subject + been + -ing to ask about the duration of an activity that continued up to a past moment. How long had he been searching?
15. **A** Correct Answer: had been looking ✓ Explanation: The Past Perfect Continuous shows an action (looking) that continued for a specific duration (for two days) before another past event (they found them). They had been looking for two days.
16. **A** Correct Answer: had been crying ✓ Explanation: The Past Perfect Continuous highlights the continuous nature of the activity and its visible effect (red eyes). It emphasizes that crying was ongoing before the moment of observation. She had been crying for a long time.
17. **A** Correct Answer: had been training ✓ Explanation: The Past Perfect Continuous stresses the duration and continuity (for six months) of training leading up to a past event (the championship). Had been training best captures this ongoing effort.
18. **A** Correct Answer: had been playing ✓ Explanation: The Past Perfect Continuous (had been + -ing) shows the action of playing music was ongoing (for hours) right up until the roommate's request in the past. He had been playing the same song for hours.
19. **A** Correct Answer: had been discussing ✓ Explanation: By the time I got introduces a past reference point. The Past Perfect Continuous shows that the discussion was already in progress for some time before that point. They had been discussing the issue for quite a while.
20. **A** Correct Answer: had been studying ✓ Explanation: The Past Perfect Continuous shows a continuous activity (studying Spanish) that lasted for a period (for two years) before a completed past event (she moved to Madrid). She had been studying Spanish for two years.

Part 3: Fill in the Blank

21. **had been treating** Correct Answer: had been treating ✓ Explanation: We use the Past Perfect Continuous (had been + verb-ing) to show an action that was in progress for a period of time before another past event. The treating happened continuously up to the ambulance's arrival.
22. **had been working** Correct Answer: had been working ✓ Explanation: The Past Perfect Continuous explains the cause of a past state. Had been working shows the ongoing activity that caused her exhaustion.
23. **had been arguing** Correct Answer: had been arguing ✓ Explanation: We use had been + verb-ing to emphasise the duration of an action in progress before a completed past event. The arguing continued up to the moment they agreed.
24. **had you been waiting** Correct Answer: had you been waiting ✓ Explanation: In questions with the Past Perfect Continuous, the structure is How long + had + subject + been + verb-ing? This asks about the duration of an ongoing past action.
25. **had been raining** Correct Answer: had been raining ✓ Explanation: The Past Perfect Continuous is used here to explain a visible result in the past. The rain was the ongoing cause of the wet ground.
26. **had been hiding** Correct Answer: had been hiding ✓ Explanation: Had been + verb-ing shows a continuous, repeated action over a period before a specific past moment. The hiding was ongoing up to the moment of admission.
27. **had been cooking** Correct Answer: had been cooking ✓ Explanation: The phrase by the time signals the Past Perfect Continuous to show an action in progress up to a specific past point. The cooking started before and continued until dinner.
28. **were** Correct Answer: were ✓ Explanation: The main clause describing the result uses the Past Simple (were), while the cause uses Past Perfect Continuous. Red eyes were the visible evidence of her past continuous crying.
29. **had been training** Correct Answer: had been training ✓ Explanation: Had been training shows a prolonged activity in progress over a specific time period before a later past event. The phrase for two years confirms the duration focus of the Past Perfect Continuous.
30. **had been taking** Correct Answer: had been taking ✓ Explanation: Had been taking uses the Past Perfect Continuous to describe an ongoing habit or action in the past that was in progress before another past situation. The negative hadn't been sleeping provides the context.

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.