19 Review of the Past Simple, Continuous and Perfect

1 Introduction

Read this true story. It happened some years ago.

A young man walked into a supermarket in Southampton and put a few items of food in a basket. He had chosen a time when not many people were shopping in the store. He found a checkout where no one else was waiting. When the cashier had checked the goods, the man gave her a £10 note. When she opened the till, the man quickly snatched all the money from it and ran out of the store before she realized what was happening. At the time the security guard was standing at the other end of the store. When staff checked the records in the till, they found that the thief had taken only £4.37. As he had left the £10 note behind, the operation had cost him £5.63.

2 Comparison of tenses

We use the Past Simple to talk about the past (see Unit 8).

He snatched the money and ran away.

The Past Simple is used for the actions in the story, to tell us what happened next.

We use the Past Continuous (see Unit 9) for something around a past time or a past action.

At the time of the incident, not many people were shopping in the store.

The few customers were in the middle of doing their shopping.

We use the Past Perfect (see Unit 18) for things before a past situation.

Staff found that the thief had taken only £4.37.

The theft of the money happened before they found out how much.

3 Past Simple and Past Continuous

We often use these two forms together when a shorter action comes in the middle of a longer one (see Unit 10.2).

I was waiting at the checkout when I noticed a strange-looking man.

Seeing the man came in the middle of the wait.

4 Past Simple and Past Perfect

When we use these two forms together, we use the Past Perfect for what happened earlier.

A man walked into a supermarket. He had chosen a quiet time.

The choice of the time came before the arrival in the supermarket.

In this example, one past action followed another.

He filled the basket and went to the checkout.

We can also use either when … had done, or after … did/had done.

When he had filled the basket, he went to the checkout.

After he had filled (or After he filled) the basket, he went to the checkout.

But when one short action comes straight after another, we use the Past Simple for both.

When she opened the till, he snatched all the money out of it.

Note the different meanings.

When I switched the TV on, the programme started. I was just in time.

When I switched the TV on, the programme had started. I missed the beginning.

We can use the Past Perfect or the Past Simple with before or until. There is no difference in meaning.

The man arrived at the store before it had opened/before it opened.

The chairman didn't speak until he had heard/until he heard all the arguments.
A Past Simple, Continuous and Perfect (1–4)

Look at these sentences and then tick the right answer.

David and Tom were talking together when a young woman spoke to them.
Which took more time, a) ✔ what David and Tom said, or b) ☐ what the woman said?
1 Mike had put up the tent, but Harriet was still unloading things from the car.
Which finished first, a) ☐ putting up the tent, or b) ✔ unloading?
2 Mark went home and switched off the computer.
What did he do first, a) ☐ go home, or b) ☐ switch off the computer?
3 When Claire arrived, Henry was walking up and down.
Which started earlier, a) ☐ Claire’s walking, or b) ☐ Henry’s walking?
4 When Sarah had phoned the office, she drove to the hotel.
Did she phone the office a) ☐ before, or b) ☐ after driving to the hotel?

B Past Simple and Past Perfect (4)

Write the two sentences as one. Use when and the Past Perfect in either the first or the second part of the sentence.

1 Nick saved enough money. He bought a motorbike.
2 Mark put all the dishes away. He dried them.
3 I looked both ways. I pulled out into the road.
4 The golfers went into the clubhouse. They played the last hole.

C Daniel is telling the story of how he forgot his passport. Put the verbs into the correct form.

Daniel is telling the story of how he forgot his passport. Put the verbs into the correct form.

It happened last August at the airport. A few weeks before, a group of us (1) ….. (decide) to go to Greece together for a holiday.
(2) ….. (we / wait) in the queue at passport control when suddenly (3) ….. (I / realize) that (4) ….. (I / forget) my passport. (5) ….. (it / be) quite a shock. (6) ….. (I / hurry) to a phone and (7) ….. (ring) my parents.
(8) ….. (they / work) in the garden, but luckily my mother (9) ….. (hear) the phone.
(10) ….. (they / find) the passport and immediately (11) ….. (drive) to the airport with it. (12) ….. (we / have) no time to talk, but (13) ….. (I / say) goodbye to them earlier that morning.
(15) ….. (I / run) all the way to the plane. I was just in time. When (16) ….. (I / get) there, the passengers (17) ….. (sit) in their seats ready for take-off. When (18) ….. (they / see) me, everyone (19) ….. (start) clapping.