



B1 - Talk about the news in the past

Learn to identify and use the 'past simple', 'past continuous', and the 'past perfect continuous' tense aspects

What happened here?



Ask and answer

1. Do you enjoy reading or watching the news?
2. What kind of news stories interest you the most? (e.g., sports, politics, human interest)
3. Have you ever read or seen a news story that moved you emotionally?
4. Do you usually trust the news you read or hear?
5. Do you think it's important to stay up to date with current events?
6. What's a news story you remember clearly from your childhood?
7. Have you ever experienced or witnessed something that later appeared on the news?



Past simple, past continuous, and past perfect simple tense aspect structures

Tense name	Structure	Use	Example
Past simple	Subject + past verb	Completed action in the past	<i>The fire damaged the ceiling.</i>
Past continuous	Subject + was/were + verbING	Ongoing action at a specific time in the past	<i>People were shouting as he ran up the stairs.</i>
Past perfect simple	Subject + had + past participle	An action completed before another past action	<i>He had held his son just two hours earlier.</i>

The Boy on the Eighth Floor

Last Tuesday evening, an apartment complex in Johannesburg caught fire after a gas explosion in one of the lower-level kitchens. As the flames rose through the building, residents began to evacuate quickly. However, one family on the eighth floor could not escape in time. At 8:45 p.m., a firefighter named Siphon Dlamini arrived on the scene with his crew. While his commander was assessing the situation, Siphon noticed a small boy crying through the window of a smoky apartment. The commander told him it was too dangerous to go in — the fire was spreading rapidly, and the building's structure was becoming unstable.

But Siphon didn't hesitate. Just two hours earlier, he had been at the hospital, holding his newborn son for the very first time. That powerful moment had filled him with a deep sense of love and courage. So, despite the danger, he entered the building. As he was climbing the stairs, thick smoke was filling the halls. Alarms were ringing, and people were shouting. Siphon had trained for situations like this, but nothing had ever felt this real. When he reached the eighth floor, the fire had already damaged part of the ceiling. Still, he managed to break down the apartment door and found the boy hiding under a bed.

He picked the child up and carried him down all eight flights of stairs, shielding him from the smoke and heat. The boy had fainted, but paramedics revived him minutes later. Siphon's bravery was praised across the country — and his commander, while initially furious, later admitted that Siphon had saved a life that night.

Imagine you were one of the people ...



... watching the rescue from the street. Tell the story from your perspective. Try to use all three tenses: past simple, past continuous, and past perfect simple.

Choose the correct answer

1. What caused the apartment fire?

- a. A lightning strike.
- b. A cigarette.
- c. A gas explosion.
- d. An electrical short.

2. Why couldn't the family on the eighth floor escape in time?

- a. They didn't hear the alarm.
- b. The elevator wasn't working.
- c. They were asleep.
- d. The fire spread too quickly.

3. What did Sipho see that made him act quickly?

- a. A mother screaming for help.
- b. A boy crying at the window.
- c. Flames coming from the roof.
- d. His commander shouting instructions.



Choose the correct answer

4. Why was Sipho's decision to enter the building especially emotional?

- a. He had once lived in the same apartment.
- b. He had recently lost a family member.
- c. He had just become a father.
- d. He was afraid of fire.

5. What happened after Sipho rescued the boy?

- a. The building collapsed.
- b. The boy was rushed to hospital but didn't survive.
- c. The boy was unconscious but revived by paramedics.
- d. Sipho fainted and needed help.

6. How did the commander feel after the rescue?

- a. Proud but still angry.
- b. Furious and suspended Sipho.
- c. Unaware of what happened.
- d. Impressed and grateful.



Transform each sentence to the tense indicated in brackets

1. The firefighter rescued the boy. (*change to past continuous*)
2. The boy cried when the fire broke out. (*change to past perfect simple for the first action*)
3. He entered the building. (*change to past perfect simple*)
4. People were shouting and running. (*change to past simple*)
5. He had celebrated the birth of his son. (*change to past simple*)
6. Sipho was climbing the stairs. (*change to past perfect simple*)



Linking words to show interruption (past continuous + past simple)

These linking words/phrases are often used when one longer action (past continuous) is interrupted by a shorter action (past simple):

Linking word/phrase	Example sentence
when	He was climbing the stairs when the ceiling collapsed.
while	While he was rescuing the boy, the fire spread to another floor.
as	As people were shouting , the firefighters arrived .
just as	Just as he was about to enter , the commander called him back.
in the middle of	He was carrying the boy in the middle of a dangerous collapse.

Common time phrases by tense

These can help you notice patterns and use the correct tense more intuitively.

Tense	Common time phrases	Example sentence
Past simple	Yesterday, last night, last week, in 2010, two days ago, then, suddenly	He rescued the boy last night during the fire.
Past continuous	While, when, as, all evening, at that moment, the whole time	He was carrying the boy when the wall started to collapse.
Past perfect simple	Before, by the time, already, just, never, until then, earlier	He had held his son just before getting the emergency call.

Match the sentence halves

1. Sipho was climbing the stairs.
 2. While the residents were evacuating.
 3. As the fire was spreading.
 4. He was trying to open the door.
 5. Just as Sipho was leaving the hospital.
- A. ... when the fire alarm went off.
 - B. ... just as he reached the 8th floor.
 - C. ... the boy suddenly screamed for help.
 - D. ... the firefighter arrived.
 - E. ... he received a call about the fire.





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