Past Tenses

There are four past tense forms in English:

Past simple: I worked-Did I work?-I did not work (*or* I broke-Did I break?)

Past continuous: I was working-Was I working?-I was not working

Past perfect: I had worked-Had I worked?-I had not worked

Past perfect continuous: I had been working-Had I been working?-I had not been working

1. **Simple Past** (Key words: yesterday, last week/month/…, in 1986, when, etc)\*

The simple past tense is used to indicate or describe something that happened or existed in the past. The situations or conditions to use a simple past tense is to:

* describe an action, event or condition that occurred in the past or at a specified time
* describe an action or occurrence of an event that is done repeatedly and regularly
* describe events that have occurred in quick succession in the past.
* describe the main events of a story

1. **Past Continuous** (Key words: as, while)

Past continuous tense is used to indicate an ongoing event in the past. Other conditions where past continuous tense is used are:

* To show that someone is in the middle of an action. *Example: I was calling him when he came home.*
* Is used to describe an action taking place when another occurred. *Example: While they were painting the door, I was painting the windows.*
* For an action that was taking place in the past when an interrupted action happened. *Example: While he was working on his laptop, he fell asleep.*
* To provide the details of a story (which are not that important). *Example: When I woke up, the birds were chirping.*

1. **Past Perfect** (Key words: before, after, by the time)

The past perfect tense describes an event that happened in the past before another event (simple past tense is used for the ‘recent’ action). The situations where a Past Perfect Tense is used are to:

* describe an event or action which happened before a definite time in the past. Example: We had cleaned up the terrace before the watchman arrived.
* describe an action that happened in the past before another action took place. Example: We had reached their house after the dinner was over.

1. **Past Perfect Continuous** (key words: after, before, by the time)

This tense is used to describe the duration of actions that were going on in the past up until another action in the past happened. They are often used in the following situations:

* For an action that has occurred over a period of time having begun in the past.
* To describe an action which started and finished in the past (but we want to stress its duration) before another past action.

Other ways to talk about the past

1. **used to/would**

Used to and would are both use to describe something that happened regularly in the past but doesn't happen any longer, but there is a difference between them. ‘Would’ is not used with stative verbs such as *love, be, understand*, and *feel*. We don't normally use the negative or question form of 'would' for past habits.

\*There are some verds that do not form their past tense with the suffix -ed. Instead, they form their past tense and their past participle irregularly.

*Example: catch – caught – caught, speak – spoke - spoken*