

Lesson Plan: Past perfect continuous

Level	Intermediate (B1–B2)
Time	60–75 minutes
Skills	Grammar, speaking, writing
Focus	Had been + -ing; duration before a past event; evidence function; vs. past perfect simple

OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Form the past perfect continuous correctly: had been + -ing
- Use it to show duration of an action up to a past point in time
- Use it to give evidence for or explain a past situation
- Distinguish between past perfect simple (completion) and continuous (duration)

TARGET LANGUAGE & EXAMPLES

Form

- Subject + had been + verb-ing (all persons)
- She had been waiting for over an hour when he finally arrived.
- They had been working on the project for months before it was cancelled.
- Had you been living here long when the earthquake happened?

Uses

- Duration before a past event: By 2010, she had been teaching for 20 years.
- Evidence for a past situation: His hands were dirty. He had been gardening.
- Interrupted action: She had been reading when the phone rang.

Past perfect simple vs. continuous

- Simple — emphasises completion: He had finished the report before she arrived.
- Continuous — emphasises duration: He had been writing the report for three hours.
- State verbs — ONLY simple: I had known her for years. NOT had been knowing.

Meaning & Nuance

Situation	Past perfect simple	Past perfect continuous
Emphasise duration of activity	—	She had been cooking for 3 hours.
Emphasise completion	He had cooked dinner.	—
Explain a past situation	—	She was exhausted — she'd been running.
State verbs (know, be, have)	She had known him for years.	WRONG: had been knowing
Repeated actions	He had phoned her 5 times.	He had been phoning her all morning.

LESSON PROCEDURE

1. Warm-up: What had been happening? (10 min)

Task: Show 4 images of scenes with clear physical evidence. Students speculate.

- 'The room is a mess. What had been happening?' → 'They'd been having a party.'
- *Elicits the structure through engaging, visual deduction.*

2. Presentation (15 min)

Task: Form: had been + -ing. Three uses: duration, evidence, interrupted action.

- Contrast with past perfect simple — duration vs. completion.
- State verbs never appear in continuous forms — review the list.

3. Guided practice (10 min)

Task: Choose past perfect simple or continuous — justify the choice.

- 'By the time the ambulance arrived, he ___ (lose) consciousness.' → had lost (completion)
- 'She was exhausted because she ___ (work) all day.' → had been working (duration)

4. Narrative writing (20 min)

Task: Students write a story about an event that interrupted something else.

- 'When the police arrived, the thieves had been...' — minimum 100 words.
- Must include at least 3 past perfect continuous forms.

TEACHER NOTES

- Past perfect continuous is often skipped in syllabuses but appears regularly in authentic texts and exams.
- The evidence function ('she was muddy — she'd been gardening') is highly communicative and memorable.

EXTENSION / HOMEWORK

Choose one or more:

1. Write 6 sentences using past perfect continuous to explain a past situation.
2. Write a short narrative using both past perfect simple and continuous — label which is which.
3. Find 3 examples in a novel or article and explain their function.