



## **Basic Grammar Unit 5**

These materials are only suitable for use in the Basic Grammar class. There is some information, there are some tasks, but they only make sense when used as the basis for thinking and discussing in class. The content of each unit has been drawn from a variety of sources: from various grammar books and my own ideas and teaching experience. At the beginning of the term I hand out a bibliography with details of all the grammar books I have drawn on. These books are indicated only with an abbreviation here.

### **Unit 5 Talking about the past**

This unit focuses on the narrative past tenses and is divided into two parts:

- (1) The use of the simple past and past progressive
- (2) The use of all the other narrative past tenses

**(1) Part one**

***Atticus***  
**STEPHEN PILE**

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**JOKER JAGGER**

IN WALKED Mick Jagger, “Ello,” he said and walked out again. There is now going to be a lull, because he has gone off upstairs to look for something or other. We are, by the way, in the Chelsea headquarters of the Rolling Stones.

He was wearing a blue and white hooped tee shirt and yellow tracksuit trousers, which is all I can tell you about him at the moment, except that he is giving interviews for the first time in 18 months to promote the Stones’ new album, Emotional Rescue. It comes out tomorrow.

My plan was to write something a little bit special about how this legend, the north Surrey bottom waggler and vocalist, the nomadic up-tempo Nijinsky, the LSE dropout, now as rich as Croesus’ agent, is facing up to the approach of middle age. I had hopes that it might be the definitive study of the man and his talent.

Before long I was summoned up the three flights of narrow stairs, bedecked with photos of Jagger in characteristic singing postures. On one floor lounged his girlfriend Jerry Hall. She was strikingly attractive and watching a video recording simultaneously. At the top was a small room where the singer has set up camp.

He was fiddling with the hi-fi system and worrying about the afternoon’s cricket being rained off. He didn’t look at all old. In fact, he looked exactly the same as ever and was clearly in a playful mood.

It was time for the first question. “When you look back on yourself at 20 do you .....

“Nah, you don’t want to ask all that,” he said, pleasantly. I sat on the sofa, primly clutching my list of 30 questions.

“Why not?”

“You want something more conversational.”

I explained that this was my first week on Atticus. “I wish I could tell you I was buying a house in Wiltshire or that I’d just finished the first volume of my memoirs to be serialised in the (big grin) Observer.”

That amused him and he raked his hands through his hair repeatedly in the pointedly feminine manner which has become his trade mark over the past 18 years. “I know what,” he said. “I’m not coming back to England now that tax is easier.” He nodded to indicate that this was the sort of question with which I should be concerned. I jotted it down.

He said that the album had taken two years to make and the title was chosen because “it sounds nice.” He said he would like to visit England for two months in the early summer every year, except when he is 40. “I couldn’t stand all that fuss when I’m 40.” He said that before he was a rock star, he was planning to do a second degree. “I did law and economics at the LSE to fill in gaps but then I wanted to do an arts degree.”

He is 37 and enjoying life: drifting between his homes in London, Berkshire, New York and Paris. He likes sport, sees friends and writes songs in his own time.

It wasn’t what I was planning, but he said you would like it.

(Taken gratefully from the Observer, date unknown)

### Task (1)

Underline all the simple pasts and past progressives and start to think about why each form is used. Any ideas?

### Notes:

(See CGE p 69-70)

When we looked at the present progressive in Unit 1 we saw that in general it denotes the temporary and potentially incomplete nature of the state or event. The same holds for the past progressive. Obviously, when seen from the present, all past states and events are “past”, “complete”. Seen with reference to some point in the past, however, a past event or state can be considered temporary or incomplete.

When do I use the simple past? When do I use the past progressive?

- The decision can be grammatically based. If the verb used is classed as a state verb, then you cannot use the progressive.
- The decision may be based on the semantics of the verb. As the progressive clearly implies the potentially incomplete nature of the event, there can be a great difference in meaning between the simple and progressive form with certain verbs.

### Example:

The man **was drowning** – but a passer-by jumped in and saved him.

The man **was drowning** – a passer-by jumped in and tried to rescue him, but it was too late.

“was drowning” = event in progress, not necessarily completed.

### Contrast:

The man **drowned**. The funeral took place two days later.

“drowned” = the event was completed.

This difference is particularly clear with

- a) transitional event verbs (cf Unit 1) such as drown
- b) process verbs such as change, mature, grow

Example:

The weather **was changing** when I got up this morning. It was cloudy, but it looked as if the sun was trying to come out.

The progressive “was changing” indicates movement towards the change.

Contrast:

The weather **changed** overnight. It was warm and sunny yesterday, but when I wakened up it was cold and wet.

The simple form indicates the completion of the change.

With momentary verbs such as hit, jump, kick, knock, nod, tap, the progressive powerfully suggests repetition (GCE p 96)

Example:

Believe it or not, he was just sitting in the restaurant, having dinner, when this stranger came up to him and **hit** him!

Simple form means the stranger hit him once (that was enough!)

Contrast:

One man was lying on the ground, and the other **was hitting** him.

Progressive implies the hitting was repeated.

- The decision may be based on the semantics of the context, i.e. on the sequencing of events as seen by the speaker-writer.

Example:

When I arrived, the hostess **made** some coffee.

When you want to express that the actions occurred in sequence, use the past simple in both.

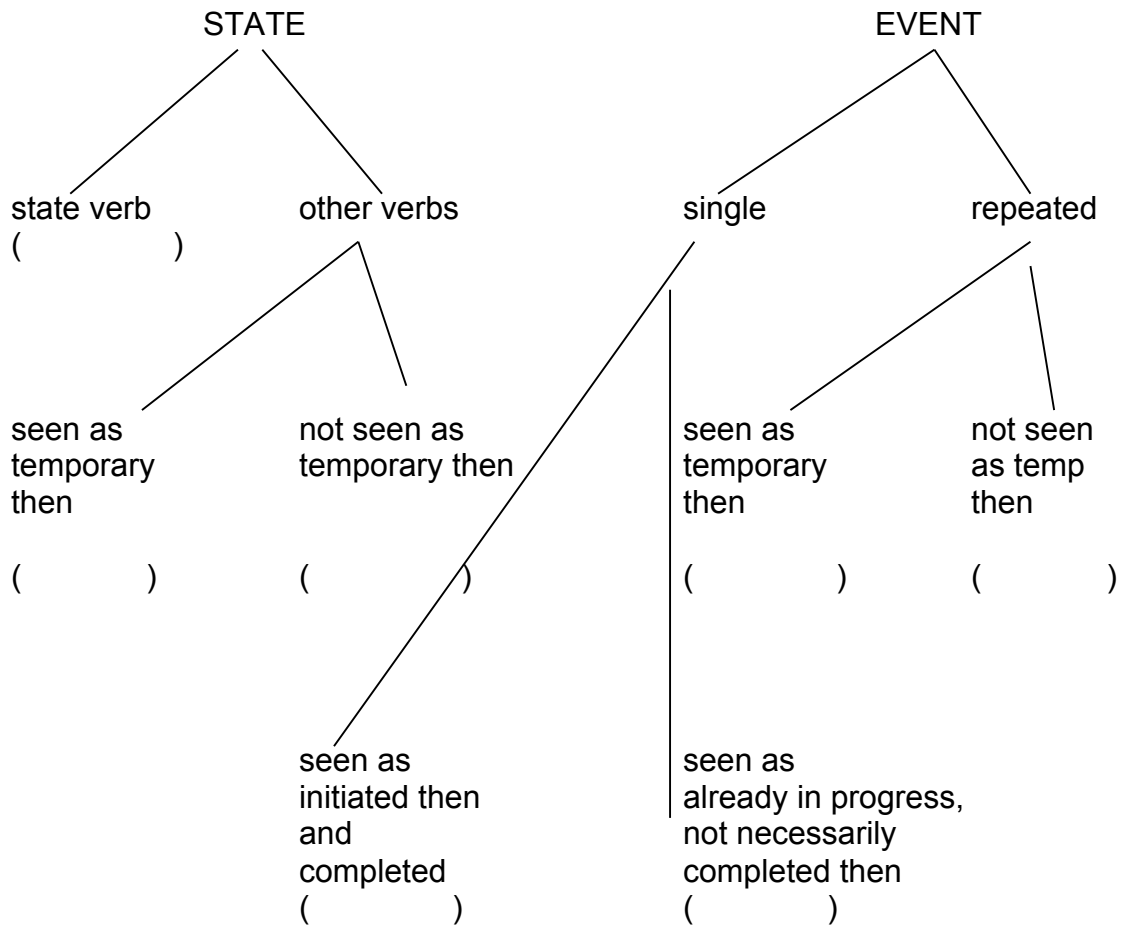
Contrast:

When I arrived the hostess **was making** some coffee.

When you want to express that the one action frames the other, use the past simple for the “durationless” event and the past progressive for the “frame”:

How would you express this graphically?

Simple past/past progressive to express past states and events



Label the above a) to g) from left to right, and write the correct forms in the brackets.

Task (2) Use the diagram to help you interpret the following:

1. I looked over at John. He nodded agreement.
2. I looked over at John. He was nodding agreement.
3. John wrote a novel several years ago.
4. John was writing a novel several years ago.
5. The clock chimed every quarter of an hour.
6. The clock was chiming every quarter of an hour.
7. He just got up and left when I went into the room.
8. He was just leaving when I went into the room.
9. While he was writing letters, she did the ironing.
10. While he wrote the letters, she did the ironing.
11. While he slept/was sleeping, she did the ironing.

PAST SIMPLE

PAST PROGRESSIVE

STATE

unrestrictive

limited duration,  
temporary

Honesty was the best policy.

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I lived in London

I was living in London at that time

He was silly

(He was being silly = acting out of character = event rather than state)

He had a terrible cough

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SINGLE EVENT

instantaneous  
or actions in sequence

durative, giving a  
framing effect

Bobic headed the ball to Müller ..

Müller was racing towards the goal when suddenly ..

I made some coffee then sat down

I was just making the coffee when ...

The bird died

The bird was dying when we found it. We took it home but ...

REPEATED EVENT

iterative, habitual

iterative, habitual,  
but of limited du-  
ration, temporary

Oxford always rowed well

Cambridge was rowing well that summer too

She always/usually etc walked to work

He was basically lazy and was only walking to work while the buses were on strike

Whenever my friend came I made some coffee

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Task (3) (Extra task.....)

## (2) Part 2

Read through the texts, highlighting all the verb forms which refer to the past.  
(Texts 1 – 4 are from CGI)

(1) She looked at the rows of new books. “Have you anything really shocking, Reggie? I adore mucky books, and you never have any in stock.”

She was wearing a scent like burnt roses; it seemed to fill the room, overlaying the smell of books.

“Do you know any good ones, Joe?” she asked me.

“I like my pornography in real life,” I said.

“Well, what are we waiting for?”

Reggie was watching us with a curious intentness; the Library was the clearing-house for all the town’s gossip. I decided to change the subject.

(John Braine: Room at the Top)

(2) Many scientists believed, when calculus first came into use, that it would ultimately let them predict the continuing behaviour of every moving thing. But at the same time, through studying gambling games, mathematicians discovered the laws of probability, which reminded them of the leaven of uncertainty that lurks in almost any sequence of events.

(Time Life Pocket Books: Mathematics)

(3) It was really extraordinary how in certain people a simple apprehension about a thing like catching a train can grow into a serious obsession. At least half an hour before it was time to leave the house for the station, Mrs Forster would step out of the elevator all ready to go, with hat and coat and gloves, and then, being quite unable to sit down, she would flutter and fidget about from room to room until her husband, who must have been well aware of her state, finally emerged from his privacy and suggested in a cool dry voice that perhaps they had better get going now, had they not?

(Roald Dahl: Kiss Kiss)

(4) Fred Mate: I was in the garden kipping on the joe, the piano, when suddenly a leather omnibus pulls up, and a man with a masked boxing-glove leaps off. “What’s that up there?” he says. I looks up and – Wallop, wallop! Down I goes, and – wallop, wallop again!!

Policeman: Did you notice anything particular about this man?

Fred Mate: Yes, he kept on walloping me.

(Spike Milligan: The Goon Show. The Ballad of the Punch up the Conk)

(5) It was a terrific loft we built down there in the woods. It was smaller than our first place, the one in his yard. Our first flock in Birdy's yard was big. There were ten pairs, and two extra cocks. We had all good stock, no junk birds, no cornys, all purebred. I figure if you're going to spend money on feed, you might's well have good birds. Birdy's always trying to bring in some kind of shitty bird just because he likes it. We used to have big arguments about this.

We had three pairs of blue bars, four pairs of blue checks, a pair of red checks and two pairs of white kings. No fancy birds, no tumblers, no fantails; none of that crap.

*Now I think. I know.*

*Know. Think. Nothing.*

When we sold the old flock, Birdy's mother made us scrape the pigeon shit from the front porch where the birds used to roost. She had the whole porch repainted with our pigeon money.

Birdy's mother's a first-class bitch.

Anyway, so we have no money to buy birds for the new loft in the tree. Birdy isn't supposed to have pigeons at all, anywhere.

We get our first two birds down at Sixty-third Street under the el. There's a big flock of street pigeons there, mostly pure junk. We'd go watch them after school. We'd take the free bus from the the railroad terminal to Sears. We're about thirteen, fourteen then.

(William Wharton: Birdie)

(6) Ever since the Eeles family moved into their house in Brookvale Road, Olton, Warwickshire, they had been suffering from the extreme and disturbing behaviour of their neighbours. Almost every night the Prescotts would play the same record on their record player at high volume again and again. They constantly spied and eavesdropped on the Eeles, and used to shout threats and insults at them. This kind of behaviour had already forced the previous neighbours to move out, and driven the former owner to threaten the Prescotts with a carving knife.

The Prescotts were in fact known to be mentally ill. Both Mr and Mrs Prescott had previously been in mental hospitals and their daughter was obviously far from well.

(Adapted from John Payne: Standpoints: All in the Mind)

Make a list of the different forms used.

What kind of things might we want to express about the past, and what tense and aspect would we use?

	The past	Verb form? Example?
Past state		
Single event		
Past habit		
Framing event		
Temporary state		
Event before past time		
State up to past time		
Temporary situation up to past time		
Future as seen from past		

Anything else? And how would you represent these “times“ graphically on the time line?

Task (4) Read the story, called „Multiplication“ and try to figure out the time frame first, then put the verbs into a form which fits the story:

At last the telephone .....(ring). The whisky bottle .....now nearly empty (be). My hand .....(tremble) as I .....(lift) the receiver. Sure enough, it .....(be) the hospital. “Congratulations, Mr Jennings!” It was the sister’s warm and friendly voice. “You .....(just become) the father of triplets. Your wife and three girls are all doing well .....

I don’t remember any more of the conversation. I only know that, when I .....(come round) some time later, the receiver .....(hang down) by the table where I obviously .....(drop it). I quickly .....(swallow) the last of the whisky before putting on my jacket and leaving for the hospital.

I .....(look forward) to having a child. I .....(sit) at home in my armchair dreaming of it. I .....(imagine) what we would do when he or she was grown-up. I .....(think) how nice it would all be. But three prams, three cots, three lots of nappies to change! No!

Alice and I .....(know) there was a chance of a multiple birth as she .....(take) a fertility drug. But triplets! I .....(not, think) it could happen to me.

By the time I .....(arrive) at the hospital I .....(calm down) a bit and when I .....(see) the three little beings in their incubators, I .....(know) there .....(be) no mistake. I think Alice.....(know) what .....(go on) in my mind when I .....(go) in to see her. “Never mind, “ she said weakly. “What would you have said if there had been four?”

### Task (5)

The story as it was told in court was as follows. Early in the morning of 19th June, Victor Eeles ..... after another disturbed night, ..... his rifle, ..... next door and ..... his neighbours, Mr and Mrs prescott and their daughter Marjorie.

Ever since the Eeles family moved into their house in Brookvale Road, Olton, Warwickshire, they ..... from the extreme and disturbing behaviour of their neighbours. Almost every night the Prescotts ..... the same record on their record player at high volume again and again. They ..... and ..... on the Eeles, and ..... threats and insults at them. This kind of behaviour ..... the previous neighbours to move out, and ..... the former owner to threaten the Prescotts with a carving knife.

The Prescotts were in fact know to be mentally ill. Both Mr and Mrs Prescott ..... in mental hospitals and their daughter was obviously far from well. Complaints about them to the police were passed on to the Welfare Department. They, however, did not intervene effectively to bring help and relief to either family and the provocation of the Eeles family continued.

In court Eeles was described as “tolerant and completely inoffensive“. A nighbour testified: “I ..... of him as a kind and gentle man.“ Eales said himself in court: “I hate violence. I hate rows. I will walk away, do anything not to cause rows. But he could not walk away from his own home. He bottled up his anger, but then his patience finally broke down altogether.

When Eeles ..... after the murder ..... in his own house again. He went to the police, gave up his rifle and confessed. He came before the court in August. The charge of murder was reduced to one of manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility. Five psychiatrists gave evidence at the trial. Eeles himself said: “I just shot and shot. I was like a madman.“

The missing verbs are:

1. get up
2. take
3. go
4. shoot
5. suffer
6. play
7. spy + constantly
8. eavesdrop
9. shout
10. force + already
11. drive
12. be + previously
13. think + always
14. come to himself
15. sit

The text is from “Standpoints: All in the mind“ by John Payne, OUP 1976

Updated March 2008