THE PAST CONTINUOUS TENSE

FORM
The past continuous tense is formed by the past tense of the verb to be + the present participle:

Affirmative          Negative          Interrogative
I was working      I was not working      was I working?
you were working    you were not working    were you working?
he/she/it was working he/she/it was not working was he/she/it working?
we were working    we were not working    were we working?
you were working    you were not working    were you working?
they were working   they were not working   were they working

Negative contractions: I wasn't working, you weren't working etc.
Negative interrogative: was he not/wasn't he working? etc.

USE

1 Interrupted Action in the Past
Use the past continuous to indicate that a longer action in the past was interrupted. The interruption is usually a shorter action in the simple past of a specific time.

- I was watching TV when she called.
- When the phone rang, she was writing a letter.
- What were you doing when the earthquake started?
- Last night at 6 PM, I was eating dinner.
- At midnight, we were still driving through the desert.
- Yesterday at this time, I was sitting at my desk at work.

2 Parallel Actions (descriptions)
When you use the Past Continuous with two actions in the same sentence, it expresses the idea that both actions were happening at the same time. We often use a series of parallel actions to describe the atmosphere at a particular time in the past.

- I was studying while he was making dinner.
- While Ellen was reading, Tim was watching television.
- Were you listening while he was talking?
- They were eating dinner, discussing their plans, and having a good time.
- When I walked into the office, several people were busily typing, some were talking on the phones, the boss was yelling directions, and customers were waiting to be helped. One customer was yelling at a secretary and waving his hands. Others were complaining to each other about the bad service.

3 Repetition and Irritation with "Always"
The Past Continuous with words such as "always" or "constantly" expresses the idea that something irritating or shocking often happened in the past.

- She was always coming to class late.
- He was constantly talking. He annoyed everyone.
- I didn't like them because they were always complaining.

4 Used without a time expression it can indicate gradual development:
- It was getting darker. The wind was rising.

While vs. When
When you talk about things in the past, "when" is most often followed by the verb tense Simple Past, whereas "while" is usually followed by Past Continuous.

Examples:
- I was studying when she called.
- While I was studying, she called.
Exercise: Complete the sentences with the verbs in brackets into the correct tense Past Simple or Past Continuous.

1.- It ____________ (snow) when I _________ (leave) home this morning.
2.- It was a sunny afternoon and people __________ (sit) on the grass in the park. Then suddenly it __________ (start) to rain.
3.- A: I tried to explain my problem to her.
   B: ____________________ (she/listen)?
4.- My brother ______________ (talk) on the phone when I arrived, but when he ____________ (see) me, he ____________ (finish) the call.
   Perhaps he thought that I ____________ (listen) to his conversation.
5.- I nearly had an accident today. A car ______________ (come) towards me, but I moved quickly out of the way and fortunately nothing ____________ (happen).
6.- A: Which hotel ______________ (you/stay) in when you lost your passport?
   B: I don’t remember. I ____________ (visit) many places during my European tour and I ____________(stay) in many different hotels.
7.- I ____________ (move) to Hastings in 1999. I ____________ (live) there when I met them.
8.- ____________ (many people / wait) for the 9:15 bus last night?
9.- I ____________ (dance) with my girlfriend when the disc jockey played our favourite song.
10.- I ____________ (study) grammar when I ____________ (fall) asleep.
11.- The scientists ____________ (work) in their laboratory when they__________ (discover) the new drug.
12.- We ____________ (climb) the wall when the gardener ____________ (see) us.
13.-Vicky ____________ (have) a beautiful dream when the alarm clock ____________ (ring)
14.- As he ____________ (run) for the bus he ____________ (collide) with a street lamp.
15.- When he ____________ (carry) a suitcase, he ____________ (drop) it on his foot.
16.- ____________ (you / do) your homework on the bus while you ____________ (come) to school?
17.- The students ____________ (read) the article when the last class ____________ (finish).
18.- When I ____________ (arrive) at the cinema, my friends ____________ (wait) for me.
19.- ____________ (you / listen) to the teacher when she ____________ (explain) this exercise?
20.- Susan ____________ (play) the piano while Mary ____________ (sing).