



Female Voice: You are now listening to the IELTS podcast. Learn from tutors and ex-examiners who are masters of IELTS preparation. Your host, Ben Worthington.

INTRODUCTION

Ben: IELTS speaking: advanced grammatical structures.

Student: Yes, please, I need your help, Ben. I only trust you because you're the one who helped me to get band 7 in writing honestly speaking.

Ben: In this tutorial, **we're going to look at past tense, past perfect continuous, and these will help you in your exam because they're very useful for telling a story and if you're telling a story and using these tenses, it's going to help you with your score because you'll be able to show the examiner that you've got a range of grammatical structures.**

Now, the content of your story is going to be important though what's more important or what the examiner is more interested in is the way in which you tell your story. So, what vocabulary do you use? Well, hopefully, you will be given anecdotes, you'll be given details, and hopefully as well, you'll be using examples.

Anecdotes, details, and examples all push your **vocabulary forward**. They push it higher because they're forcing you to use topic-specific vocabulary and they'll help expand your lexical



resource. Also, of course, we need to be using stress patterns as I have mentioned in previous tutorials.

PAST AND PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS

In this tutorial, **we're specifically going to examine why you should use the past and the past perfect continuous**. Now, we usually get a cue card and-- well, not usually. We always get a cue card, but what I wanted to say is that we'll have questions such as where were you? Who were you with? What was happening at the time?

Now, let's have a look at two short stories and then we'll decide which is better. By the way, if you can identify the accent of this lady who is telling these stories, send us an email and the first five to send in the correct answer will get a special prize.

Recording: I was with my friend Juan in the park. We saw a fire in the distance. We both got up and ran to the fire to see. Last summer, I was hanging out with my friend Juan. We'd been sitting in the park having a picnic for a couple of hours when we saw a fire in the distance. We both got up and run to the fire to see what was happening.



Ben: Now, in the first story, there's very little information about the context. We know where the storyteller was and we know that she was with-- who she was with and the basic facts. That's the first one.

In the second one, we can tell that it's a much richer story. We can tell this because we know more about the background. The speaker was relaxing having a picnic. Also, in story B, we feel more connected whereas in A, it sounds a little bit robotic almost like a list of facts.

Now, the main difference between the two is the use of the past and the past perfect continuous. With the past perfect continuous, our stories can feel more alive, more exciting, and more engaging. Now then, when do we use the past continuous? Well, we use it when we want to talk about an event in the past which was happening over a period of time and was incomplete.

I was hanging out with my friend Juan at the park. So, in this example, the past happened over a period of time. I was hanging out with my friend Juan at the park. So, there's a duration of time there. We didn't say when it finished. Some other examples: I was hanging out with my friend. We were watching a movie. He was talking on the phone. This all happened in the past and there's no end yet. There's no end in sight we could say.

So, how do we use this past continuous in the exam? Well, we're going to just look at more specifically how we can use it when we're telling a story. So, when we're telling a story, it's essential to set the context and if we use the past continuous near the beginning, it helps set up



the context in a much richer form. So, by using this continuous form earlier on in the story, you'll be able to show to the examiner you're flexible in your use of grammatical structures.

So, let's have a look at another example. So, the examiner might ask you tell me about a time when you had to change your mind.

Recording: Last year, I was studying economics at university. I remember the day really clearly. I was sitting in class and taking notes like usual when the professor asked an interesting question.

Ben: In this example, the test taker used the past continuous and the past simple to create a context before moving into the main events of the story. It's like the setup and this helps create a dynamic story and as we just mentioned, it demonstrates the speaker's ability with regards to grammatical range.

PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS

Now, let's have a look at the past perfect continuous. This is similar to the past perfect because we also use it over-- to demonstrate an event in the past that was happening over a



period of time. However, we generally use it when we want to identify how long something had happened before another event in the past.

For example, we had been sitting in the park having a picnic for a couple of hours. We had been watching a movie for over an hour. We had been talking on the phone for about 15 minutes. Now, I really like this tense because it helps you develop the context of the story because you are almost expecting now something else to happen.

We had been sitting in the park for a couple of hours. So, as a native English speaker, I'm kind of conditioned now to be waiting for the next part and this is why it's really good because you can use the past continuous to talk about something that he was doing before the main event of the story. This is what I was talking about; like almost expecting the next part.

Another example: He had been talking on the phone for about 15 minutes. So, this is the context of the story. Let's have a look again. Another example: Describe a time when you felt angry.

Recording: Just a couple of days ago, I was at the bank and I was standing in line. It was busy at the bank and I'd been waiting for over three hours to talk to the manager.

Ben: Just a couple of days ago, I was at the bank and I was standing in line. It was busy in the bank and I had been waiting for over three hours to talk to the manager. This one was in reverse. I said the main event, but afterwards I added the context. In that example, I wanted to



make it really clear that I had been waiting a long time. And this is very important information because I want to tell you about a time I felt angry. So, I've got to give you the background of the situation otherwise you'll think I'm a bit of a nut job.

Right then. **So, using the past perfect continuous makes the context very clear and it will support the main events of the story. Now, just to conclude, you want to be using past perfect continuous. You want to be using stories in your exam to make the stories and to make your exam more interesting and engaging and also obviously, you want to demonstrate that you've got a thorough understanding of the grammatical structures.**

FEW WAYS

Like I said, there's a few ways to do this. One of the best ones, one of my favorites is the past perfect continuous and the simple past, but obviously, we cannot just use these two. We've got to use a range. So, hopefully with these ones, we've got a stronger understanding. Now, let's have a look at some recent cue cards seen by students and sent in to us.

So, one cue card talks about-- sorry, in part 1, the examiner asked about the home town, about tea and coffee, and about truth and lies, which kind of sets up part 2 where the cue card stated to the candidate to talk about a situation in which you know a person didn't tell you the truth.



You've got to explain who the person was, why the person told you the lie, and explain how you felt. Logically, in part 3, there were questions about honesty and lies and just abstract concepts like truth and lies which really pushes your speaking limits.

Anyway, let's have a look at part 2 sample answer. I'll go straight through it and I want you to listen and try and identify useful phrases. Obviously, listen for the past perfect continuous and just one tip. Try and pay attention and see if you can identify higher-level word order.

CUE CARD # 1

So, just to refresh: part 2 cue card. Talk about a situation when a person you know or you knew didn't tell you the truth. Who the person was, why the person told the lie, and how you felt. Let's go.

I'd like to tell you about an old friend I have called Matt. Matt is no longer my friend because of this exact incident. When we were younger, my family and I lived in a bungalow in our village. My friend Matt used to come over to our house and he'd take a shortcut through the fields and then climb through the fence.

Well, one evening I had been expecting him to come over, but he didn't. My mum later told me that my sister had seen someone looking through her window in the evening and the peeping



Tom, so to speak, had a beige jacket on the same color as my friend's Matt. My sister couldn't confidently say it was him.

However, with the fact that I had been expecting him, it was clear in my mind what had happened. As you can expect, I confronted him about this and he categorically denied it, but I'm 99% sure it was him. Obviously, he denied it because it's shameful, embarrassing, and would have led to serious issues.

I felt tremendously disappointed. I was also really confused. I think in the end, I just ditched him as a friend. I feel nobody should put up with liars like that. I guess life's too short for rubbish like that. And that's the end of my story.

Now, a few issues there-- not issues. A few points that I want to draw your attention to. One, I recognized I was going slightly off topic, so I brought it back. I needed to explain-- I needed to fulfill the second bullet point, which was why the person told the lie. This is why I said that he told the lie because it was tremendously embarrassing or-- yes-- no, it was really embarrassing for him and he obviously denied it.

So, I had to tell the examiner-- fulfilling the criteria, I had to tell the person-- I had to tell the examiner why my friend Matt told the lie and then I mentioned how I felt about this afterwards. Note I said I felt tremendously disappointed. Originally, I wrote out I felt really disappointed, but if we're going for higher-level scores, band 8, band 9, we should be using



better vocabulary, better than normal vocabulary and, of course, using that vocabulary appropriately.

WORD ORDER

Now, regarding word order, at the beginning, hopefully you noticed I said when we were younger, my family and I... This is just a higher-level touch because normally, we would say me and my family, but it just sounds higher level. It sounds more sophisticated if you mention the other people and then you mention yourself last.

One day, my six friends and me were out fishing. Just put yourself at the end. Now, obviously as well, there were a few places of the present perfect continuous: I had been expecting him and then I said it again. However, with the fact that I had been expecting him, it was clear in my mind what had happened.

So, there's a few instances there and also a few other phrases like but I'm 99% sure it was him. So, hopefully, you got a good example of how to use it there and then as I said before, the examiner would probably follow on with questions.

In this case, he did. He followed on or she followed on with questions about honesty; probably questions such as why do you think honesty is important? How can you explain honesty? Would



you say you are an honest person? Just questions like that usually around the same topic probing your ability to explain similar situations and abstract situations and more complex situations in a full and complete manner.

Let's move on to cue card two. Describe an intelligent person. You should explain who the person is, how you know them, and why you think they are intelligent. Now, by the way, as a side note you might think my answers sound pretty full, pretty rounded and there are two reasons for that.

The first one is, obviously, I'm a native English speaker, but secondly, I did write these out and I did go back and I improved them. For example, like before, I substituted really for tremendously and while I'm writing it, I'm obviously going back and I'm improving it and I'm checking that I'm fulfilling the cue card criteria.

In the exam, **I recommend you make notes and structure it. Don't write it out word for word; just make notes, write down the expressions that you want to use, plan the order.** This is all covered in the [Speaking Confidence online course](#) we have at IELTS podcast, but also this is a very good technique in general for preparing for part 2.

[Get a load of cue cards](#), write out your answer, go back, try and improve them and then listen to yourself saying them as well and try and get some feedback on those. Anyway, let's jump into it.



CUE CARD # 2

Describe an intelligent person. You must include who the person is, how you know them and why you think they are intelligent. So, let's go. A tremendously intelligent person I know would be my uncle Allan. He's so smart he retired at around age 50. Most people have to wait until after 65.

Anyway, I think he's smart for a number of reasons. Firstly, he's a UK chess master champion and he's won numerous tournaments. He's also had a dazzling career as a tax adviser. He worked in the best firms in his field in the UK. For example, he worked at PricewaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte, and I think possibly Ernst & Young, although I'm not so sure about the last one.

I know him because when I was younger, we met at a wedding and just recently, we met again at a funeral. At the funeral, he was telling me about how he had been researching his family tree way back into the past. He found out that his ancestors were humble peasants in Preston.

I think he's intelligent because of his career knowledge and his expertise in complex subjects such as tax and chess. For me, I admire the fact that he managed to retire so early. This is the goal that really resonates with me and that's the end of my story.



Now, there's a few-- I want to draw your attention to a few points in this model cue card answer. One, I gave you some examples there of why I think he's intelligent and this forced me to use specific vocabulary; unique vocabulary. I used chess master. I used tournaments.

Also, there's a slight bit of irony there and sarcasm. I said he's got a dazzling career as a tax adviser. Obviously, you don't have to introduce any irony or little bits of sarcasm there, but just a sprinkling-- a bit of humor there.

Anyway, I also gave real world examples afterwards. I talked about Ernst & Young, Deloitte, PricewaterhouseCoopers. So, it makes it realistic and this is a real story. Talking about real events, real stories makes it so much easier, as I've said in previous tutorials.

Also, I used a conjunction which is also something that we've talked about in previous tutorials. I said although I'm not so sure about the last one; although. So, it's a useful conjunction there. And I'm working through the cue card bullet points. The next point I'm talking about is how I know him. I know him because when I was younger, we met at a wedding and just recently, at a funeral too.

Anyway, as you heard, I used the past perfect continuous. I said he had been researching his family tree. Some more unique vocabularies; family tree. This is a true story. He did tell me that his ancestry can be traced back to peasantry; to rather humble beginnings as peasants in Preston, which is a town near Manchester.



Anyway, I'm working through the bullet points giving little anecdotes, humorous anecdotes. I think it was quite amusing when he told me that he came from peasants. Most people want to say oh yes, I came from King Henry V. He was like yes; I came from some peasants in Preston. I thought it was quite funny, but anyway.

Then I talk about why I think he's intelligent. I just say it again. I'm going back to it and I explain a little more detail. It's a complex subject matter. Tax is complex and it's not interesting, in my opinion. Also, chess is quite complex and to be good at chess, it is said that you have to be rather intelligent.

And then also I just concluded using this typical structure. I concluded and I re-emphasized why I think they are intelligent and the main reason is because he managed to retire so early. And like I have done in the other cue card examples, I just clearly showed to the examiner that's the end of my story by saying and that's the end of my story. I hope you liked it.

I would have added that I hope you liked it onto the past-- onto the one I did first, but I cannot imagine the examiner liking a story about a peeping Tom. So, that's why I didn't say I hoped you liked my story about my creepy friend. It's just not congruent unless I thought the examiner is a bit creepy, but then I'm really setting myself up for a band 9 answer. If I use that, it's a little bit creepy.



CUE CARD # 3

Anyway, we're getting off topic. Let's jump into cue card three. Another recent one found online and here the cue card to-- the point is that I have to describe a singer I like, who the singer is, what specific elements I like about the singer and the style of the singer.

So, when I'm brainstorming this, I'm going to be thinking rock, opera, folk, acoustic, any opportunity to use this kind of topic-specific vocabulary. Second, the first thing that came to mind when I saw this cue card I was like oh cool. I can talk about this new singer I discovered, but then I realized that actually, I'm going to be explaining something new.

I don't know that much about this singer even though it was the first one that came into my mind and also if it's a new singer, then the chances that the examiner knows about this singer are quite slim. So, what I decided instead was I'm just going to go for a singer that everybody knows about.

So, here is the cue card and there's just a very quick, logical common sense lesson there which is similar to IELTS Writing task 2 in that just go for something that's easier to explain, that the examiner probably knows about, and that you can speak about pretty confidently. So, anyway, let's go.



The singer I'd like to tell you about is a very famous singer with a terrific voice. He's British, but I think he has Iranian roots if I remember correctly. He definitely had an old school Iranian moustache. I think he had been studying at Cambridge or Oxford when he responded to an advert to join a local rock band.

Anyway, this singer has an immensely powerful voice and although I'm not an expert on this, I think his voice covers the entire musical range. For example, in one song, Barcelona, he sang alongside a famous opera singer. Not many modern-day singers are capable of such a feat.

His style is very unique. Sometimes, he just blasts the vocals and in other songs, it's rather melodic and smooth. His name, of course, is Freddie Mercury and he sang in the famous rock band Queen. That's the end of my presentation and I hope you liked it.

So, there I worked very methodically through the cue card points and I used a little phrase that I think is very useful and it's if I remember correctly. Another variant of this is if my memory serves me well, I think it was in 1992 or whatever.

So, I obviously used the past perfect continuous; he had been studying at Cambridge. Slight little bit of humor there. It wasn't like knock-knock joke. I just made a tiny little joke about the Iranian moustache. It's just a harmless bit of fun. That's all.



Second, I said-- I didn't say he's got a really good voice. That's like band 6.5. I said he's got a terrific voice and then later to avoid repeating it, I said he's got an immensely powerful voice. Well, not to avoid repeating it, but just to dig a little bit deeper.

Also, some other [topic-specific vocabulary](#) there was his voice covers the entire musical range. How good was that? Then I give an example to prove my point, just like we should do with task 2. I'm talking about the real song, Barcelona, and how he sang alongside a famous opera singer. So, I can mention about opera there as well.

Also, another useful phrase I thought was not many modern-day singers are capable of such a feat. Are capable of such a feat; that's quite a unique phrase as well and it was used appropriately.

Now, some more topic-specific vocabulary. I didn't say he's got a really good voice. I didn't say he can sing loud, he can sing quietly. I said it's rather melodic and it's rather smooth. I also said he blasts the vocals, which is definitely too informal for the writing and I would probably say it's borderline for the speaking. Maybe a tad informal, but it's just one phrase. That's all and it sounded natural. It was a very natural use of the phrase.

Anyway, and also just as a side note, I didn't reveal his name until the last sentence. I just kept a little bit of anticipation there. By the way, when I was brainstorming this specific talk, I had a



memory about my brother and my sister and how they were so eager to tell me that Freddy Mercury had died.

I think it was 1992. They were just like mum, can we tell him? Dad, can we tell him? My brother and sister, they were really keen on telling me that Freddy Mercury had died because I was really-- like I really idolized him when I was younger. I remember to this day being in the car and my brother and sister asking can we tell him? Can we tell him? And then they said yes, tell him. And my sister just turned around. She smiled and she said Freddy Mercury died.

I wanted to tell this story, but then I realized it's got nothing to do with the cue card. The cue card asks me about a singer I like, who this singer is, what specific elements I like about him, the style of the singer and although I had this I thought amusing story about-- this tells you a lot about the relationship between my brothers and sisters. It was all just kicks and giggles. I think I was about nine at the time or something.

Anyway, I wanted to tell the story, but it wasn't relevant. It had nothing to do with the cue card, so I just ditched it in the end. Maybe I could tell it later if the opportunity came up, but there was no point talking about it because it wasn't on the cue card.

So anyway, that's that. We've done a three sample cue card. Just as a summary, just so you can get maximum value out of this tutorial, remember if you can use an example, an anecdote has



to be relevant. If you can remember to write out your cue card answers beforehand, go back and improve them and then get feedback on them.

Also, remember if you're struggling with IELTS speaking, have a look at the [online course](#) at ieltspodcast.com, the [Speaking Confidence course](#). We give you lots of practical tips. We don't just say go give a good pep talk. That's rubbish advice. Some other rubbish advice: make your talk interesting. How do you make it interesting? Give me some tools that I can use. Give me some practical advice.

This is what we aim for in these tutorials and this is what we definitely aim for in the course. This is why in our courses we [give feedback](#) because that's the fastest way to improve and also depends on you doing the work and getting the feedback and improving faster.

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