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Hi! I would like to ask about the past simple and when-clause. Normally, if I use the past simple in both clauses (main clause and when-clause) , it means the past simple in when-clause happens first and is also finished before the past simple in main clause. For example : "When they arrived, I cooked fried chicken." Here the sentence means that they arrived first and the arriving was finished and then I started cooking. And my question of this thread is : Can we use the past simple in both clauses but the past simple in the when-clause was still continuing when the past simple in the main clause started happening ? For example: "When I worked on my assignment, you studied math." Here, I mean that I started working on my assignment before you studied. And let's say the working lasted for 2 hours and in the middle of my working, you started studying , in other words I wasn't finished working when you started studying. So it's not that you started studying after I was finished working on my assignment like my previous example about arriving and cooking fried chicken. Is it possible ? Many Thanks! Normally, If I use the past simple in both clauses (main clause and when-clause) , it means the past simple in when-clause happens first and is also finished before the past simple in main clause. For example : "When they arrived, I cooked fried chicken." Here the sentence means that they arrived first and the arriving was finished and then I started cooking. Your interpretation of this particular sentence is correct, but this is a relatively unusual situation. "When" means that the two clauses share the same time reference. If both clauses are in the past tense (simple or continuous), this usually means that the two actions happened at the same time. If you want to indicate a sequence of events, you generally need a word like "before" or "after". You can then be more precise by using verbs like "start", "finish" and "begin", and using different tenses such as the past perfect. It may also help to include a time period, even if it is vague: Some time after I started working on my assignment, you began studying. Your interpretation of this particular sentence is correct, but this is a relatively unusual situation. "When" means that the two clauses share the same time reference. If both clauses are in the past tense (simple or continuous), this usually means that the two actions happened at the same time. If you want to indicate a sequence of events, you generally need a word like "before" or "after". You can then be more precise by using verbs like "start", "finish" and "begin", and using different tenses such as the past perfect. It may also help to include a time period, even if it is vague: Some time after I started working on my assignment, you began studying. Thank you! If the sentence like this appears : "When you did your homework for 2 hours, I cleaned the house". How would you interpret it ? Does it mean at some time in the two hours of doing homework, I started cleaning the house ? Or does it mean anything else ? "When I worked on my assignment, you studied math." "When you did your homework for 2 hours, I cleaned the house". Both of these sentences have their use. For me they are something that happened regularly in the past. When we were young, we had to share our books. When I studied chemistry, you studied math. Also, when you did your homework, I cleaned the house. Otherwise, I use while. While I did this, you did that. There is a difference between a moment in time (7:34 pm) and a time period (7 pm to 10 pm), also called a "duration". When you did your homework for 2 hours, I cleaned the house. While you did your homework for 2 hours, I cleaned the house. "When" can mean "at that moment", not "during that time period". So "when" is wrong if your meaning is this: During the same 2-hour time period in which you did your homework, I cleaned the house. Both of these sentences have their use. For me they are something that happened regularly in the past. When we were young, we had to share our books. When I studied chemistry, you studied math. Also, when you did your homework, I cleaned the house. Otherwise, I use while. While I did this, you did that. Thank you! But can I say "When you did your homework, I did mine" to mean that they both did the homework at the same time from the start , or in other words, you did your homework for 2 hours and I did mine for 2 hours and we did at the same time until we both finished doing homework. Is it possible? One use of "when" is "at the same moment". For example: When the clock said 9 pm, Susan was still studying. Another use of "when" is "started by a momentary event". For example: When the bell rings, students leave the classroom. When they arrived, I cooked fried chicken. Every time I search on the web for some theoretical information regarding the past perfect, I see that it's used with expressions like by yesterday, by August, by 5 o'clock and the like. I also look at my textbook, which says: The past perfect represents the "pre-past" tense, since it expresses a past action in relation to a moment that is also past. This moment can be defined by such time expressions as by 5 o'clock, by Saturday, by the end of the year, by that time, etc. and it provides the following examples: We had translated the article by 5 o'clock. We had shipped the goods by that time. By the end of the year he had learned to speak French. After reading this, one might think that you should always use the past perfect with such expressions of the past time. But if you take a closer look online, say, at some Wikipedia article, you find out that the simple past is often used with such expressions of time. So I'm at a loss here. Is it just my textbook happens to be wrong and irrelevant to how the language really works these days, or is it just my wrong interpretation and not seeing the whole picture? My current conjecture is that the past perfect is, perhaps, used with such expressions of time when we're already speaking about the past and want to talk about an earlier past relative to that past. For example, I'm speaking about what was happening in early November ("John was attending his Math class...") and I mention an earlier past ("...when he remembered he had forgotten to hand in his paper by the end of October.") But we should use the simple past when we just mention something without any context, without something following it: He confirmed by August that he was back. He completed his work on the movie by late October. So, what do you think? I only use "past perfect" along with another past verb. The past verb is "then", and the past perfect is "before then". He didn't marry her, although he had dated her for a year. So I don't see "past perfect" used by itself. But the "past verb" can be in a different sentence: He graduated in June. Before that he had lived in Boston. I think this matches your "current conjecture". I just wanted to say it simply, for others who read this thread later. After reading this, one might think that you should always use the past perfect with such expressions of the past time. But if you take a closer look online, say, at some Wikipedia article, you find out that the simple past is often used with such expressions of time. So I'm at a loss here. Is it just my textbook happens to be wrong and irrelevant to how the language really works these days, or is it just my wrong interpretation and not seeing the whole picture? It is a rather formal approach to the language. I am not sure that it was ever a rule to use the past perfect in this sort of situation. In modern English, the past perfect tends only to be used when it is required to convey the right meaning or sequence of events, and in these sentences, the word "by" does that. When actions are written about in the same sequence they occurred in, then it is usual to use the past tense, and only use the past perfect when events are described out of sequence, and you need to describe something that happened earlier than the time of the last verb. There are all sorts of exceptions and caveats, but this is a good general principle. However, the past perfect has other uses, and one of these is to indicate completion of an action that takes some time. The clearest example you give is "By the end of the year he had learned to speak French." Here, I cannot really imagine anyone using "he learned", because with "long" actions, we tend to use the past tense for their beginning, not their completion. With "We had translated the article by 5 o'clock," whether or not a writer uses the past perfect depends on how much focus they want to give to completing the translation or its having taken a long time. Past perfect is one option for showing relationships in past time. But it's not the only one. Often other "time" words and other context in the sentence or surrounding sentences make the relationship clear. Many/ Most (?) native speakers tend to use past perfect only when it makes a difference in understanding. If simple past gets the job done then we are happy with that. It's hard to put into words, but for me, past perfect often feels like verbal clutter. It's extra sounds that interrupt the flow and often don't provide much meaningful additional information. We definitely don't string a bunch of past perfects together in a row for that reason. It makes a sentence choppy and doesn't accomplish much. Even if you analyze each one and decide each one is appropriate in its context, having many in a row is not necessary or desirable. One is usually sufficient to establish the relationships. Your general understanding and examples are good. We had translated the article by 5 o'clock. We had shipped the goods by that time. By the end of the year he had learned to speak French. In these examples, two different times do exist. But they aren't the classic examples for past perfect. The classic examples are much more like your examples, with two very identifiable separate events. "We had translated the article by 5." - You finished the translation before 5. Now you are referencing five o'clock. The time you finished was prior to five o'clock, not at five o'clock. Those are the two different times, although you might only call one an actual "event". We don't think of the time reaching five as an action. Depending on the exact context, it would not be surprising to see someone word that with simple past. "We translated the article by 5." If the order is critical for some reason, like a legal case, you might be very careful about exactly how you say it. "We had translated the article by 5 so when the building burned down at 5:02 it took our translation with it." But if you are just talking with someone and there was no particular deadline, saying "We translated the article by 5" might be all the precision you need. An example of a "time" word that eliminates the need for past perfect.- He had gotten dressed got dressed for the wedding before he came to our house so we were able to leave right away when he arrived. You could use past perfect but you don't need to. "Before" makes it clear that one event preceded the other.-> gotten is, of course, basically American English. I can't not use it. It's in my blood. But others would write it a bit differently. Last edited: Oct 25, 2021 Thank you to everybody for those explanations. Hopefully, the following sentences use the past perfect and the simple past tenses correctly, each in the their appropriate contexts. 1. I had sent the letter by September. That's why I was certain that they had received it by then. 2. They should have received all letters mailed to them not later than on October 10th. That's why now, on October 11th, I am certain that they have received it by now. I had sent the letter by September. 3. I sent the letter by September. That's why I am certain that they have received it by now. Last edited: Oct 25, 2021 Unfortunately none of the sentences really sound idiomatic. That's more because of the logic than past perfect, though. The premise of all of them, "I sent the letter by", just doesn't sound natural. 1. I had sent the letter in September. That's why I was certain that they had must have received it by the middle of October. Imagine my surprise when I found out they hadn't. 2. They should have received all letters mailed to them not no later than on October 10th. That's why now, on October 11th, I am certain that they have received it by now. I had sent the letter by September. Actually, in this one, I'm not even sure what you are trying to say. Are you saying there was a deadline of October 10th? The meaning of "should" is unclear. 3. I sent the letter by in September. That's why I am certain that they have received it by now. What about these? "I was cheerful because I had managed to submit my timesheet by the deadline. As I wasn't working late that evening and was on my way home I contacted my friend and offered her to watch a late movie that night!" "Hooray! I managed to submit my timesheet by the deadline. Meaning I'm not working late today. I'm on my way home. Maybe we could catch a late movie tonight, okay?" As succinct guidance (not a "rule" - see my signature) the past perfect is used (mainly but not always in written narrative) to provide context and background to the main event; the main event is then described in the simple past. The past perfect refers to actions that were completed in the past: To quote kentix's example: 1. I had sent the letter in September. This is the context/background to -> That's why I was certain that ... " > _

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