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Present simple and present continuous (01)

We use the present simple to describe things that are always true, or situations that exist now and, as far as we know, will go on indefinitely:

- It takes me five minutes to get to school.
- Trees **grow** more quickly in summer than in winter.

To talk about particular actions or events that have begun but have not ended at the time of speaking, we use the present continuous:

- The car **isn't starting** again.
- 'Who **are you phoning?**' 'I'm **trying** to get through to Joan.'

We often use time expressions such as **at the moment**, **at present**, **currently**, **just**, and **still** to emphasise that the action or event is happening now:

- 'Have you done the shopping?' **just going.**

We use the present simple to talk about habits or things that happen on a regular basis:

- **I leave** work at 5.30 most days.
- Each July we **go** to Turkey for a holiday.

We can use the present continuous or the present simple to describe something that we regularly do at a particular time. Compare:

- We usually **watch** the news on TV at 9.00. (= we start watching at 9.00)
- We're usually **watching** the news on TV at 9.00. (= we're already watching at 9.00)

We often use the present simple with verbs that perform the action they describe:

- **I admit** I can't see as well as I used to. (= an admission)
- **I refuse** to believe that he didn't know the car was stolen. (= a refusal)

Other verbs like this (sometimes called *performative* verbs) include **accept, acknowledge, advise, apologise, assume, deny, guarantee, hope, inform, predict, promise, recommend, suggest, suppose, warn.**

We can use modals with performative verbs to make what we say more tentative or polite:.

- **I would** advise you to arrive two hours before the flight leaves.
- I'm afraid **I have to inform** you that your application for funding has been turned down.

Present simple and present continuous (02)

We often prefer to use the present simple rather than the present continuous with verbs describing *states*:

- I really **enjoy** travelling.
- The group currently **consists of** five people, but we hope to get more members soon.

Other common state verbs include **agree, assume, believe, belong to, contain, cost, disagree, feel, hate, have, hope, know, like, look, love, own, prefer, realise, regret, resemble, smell, taste.**

However, we can use the present continuous with some state verbs when we want to emphasise that a situation is temporary, for a period of time around the present. Compare:

- I **consider** him to be extremely fortunate. (This is my view) *and*
- I'm **considering** taking early retirement. (This is something I'm thinking about now)

When we tell a story or joke we often describe the main events using the present (*or* past) simple and longer, background events using the present (*or* past) continuous:

- She **goes** (*or went*) up to this man and **looks** (*or looked*) straight into his eyes. She's **carrying** (*or was carrying*) a bag full of shopping...

We can also use the present simple and present continuous like this in commentaries (for example, on sports events) and in giving instructions:

- King serves to the left hand court and Adams **makes** a wonderful return. She's **playing** magnificent tennis in this match...
- You **hold** the can in one hand. Right, you're **holding** it in one hand; now you **take** off the lid with the other.

When we want to emphasise that something is done repeatedly, we can use the present continuous with words like **always, constantly, continually, or forever**. Often we do this when we want to show that we are unhappy about it, including our own behaviour:

- They're **constantly having** parties until the early hours of the morning.

We use the past continuous in the same way:

- He **was forever including** me in his crazy schemes.

The present simple is used to report what we have heard or what we have read:

- This newspaper article **explains** why unemployment has been rising so quickly.

We also use the present simple in spoken English in phrases such as **I gather, I hear, I see, and I understand** to introduce news that we have heard, read or seen (e.g. on television):

- **I gather** you're worried about the new job?
- The Prince is coming to visit, and **I hear** he's very rich.

Exercises

Exercise One

Complete the sentences with appropriate verbs. Use the same verb for each sentence in the pair. Choose the present continuous if possible; if not, use the present simple.

- 1 a. It _____ us a fortune at the moment to send our daughter to dance classes.
- 2 b. It _____ a fortune to fly first class to Japan.
- 3 a. I _____ sitting down at the end of a long day and reading a good book.
b. It's a wonderful book. I _____ every moment of it.
- 4 a. We've always wanted a house in the country, but we _____ on where it should be.
b. When they agree with each other on so many important issues, I can't understand why they _____ now on this relatively minor matter.
- 5 a. With growing concerns about the environment, people _____ to use recycled paper

b. He doesn't like publicity, and _____ to stay firmly in the background.
- 6 a. 'Can I speak to Dorothy?' 'She _____ a shower. Can I take a message?'
b. My brother _____ three children, all girls.
- 7 a. Although he _____ three cars, all of them are extremely old.
b. In the north of the country, fewer and fewer people _____ the houses they live in.

Exercise Two

Choose the present simple or present continuous for the verbs in these texts.

- 1 Fletcher _____ (pass) to Coles who _____ (shoot) just over the bar. United _____ (attack) much more in this half...
- 2 A man _____ (come) home late one night after the office Christmas party. His wife _____ (wait) for him, and she _____ (say) to him...
- 3 Now that the rice _____ (cook) you _____ (chop up) the carrots and tomatoes and you _____ (put) them in a dish...

Exercise Three

Expand one of the sets of notes below to complete each dialogue.

continually/change/mind forever/moan/work forever/ask me/money
constantly/criticise/driving always/complain/handwriting

- 1 A: I can't read B: You're _____ about his handwriting.
- 2 A: Can I borrow 10£? B: You're...
3. A: That was a dangerous thing to do! B: You're...
- 3 A: I think I'll stay here after all. B: You're....
- 4 A: I had a bad day at the office again. B: You're....