

Teacher: N. Ouchene

Course: Grammar

Level: L2

Present Simple vs Present Continuous

- I **speak** English.
- I **am speaking** English.

What is the difference?

I speak English – is in the **Present Simple** tense

I am speaking English – is in the **Present Continuous** tense

When do we use the **Present Simple** and when do we use the **Present Continuous**?

Let's look at each one...

PRESENT SIMPLE TENSE

We use the **present simple tense**:

1. For facts or things that are always true or generally true.

- Whales **live** in the ocean.
(This is a fact, this is always true)
- A dog **has** four legs.
(This is generally true, unfortunately some dogs have three legs or less)
- It **rains** a lot in winter.
(Yes, this is generally true)
- Water **boils** at 100° Celsius.
(This is a fact, just like the fact that water freezes at 0° Celsius)

The present simple tense is also used...

2. For regular habits or repeated actions

These are often daily routines and they happen always, often, generally, every week, etc.

- I **brush** my teeth three times a day.
- I **read** in bed every night.
- He **walks** to school every day.
- She **goes** to the gym after work.
- I **study** for two hours every evening.

Common time expressions used with the *present simple tense* are:

- always, often, generally, normally, usually, sometimes, never ...
- every day, every week, every year...

PRESENT CONTINUOUS TENSE

We use the **present continuous tense**:

1. An action happening right now at the moment of speaking.

When somebody is doing something right now or something is happening right now.

- I **am teaching** an English lesson. (Yes, that is what is happening right now)
- You **are watching** a video.
- Steve **is washing** his hair.
- She **is taking** her dog for a walk.
- Please be quiet, the baby **is sleeping**.
- It **is snowing** right now.
- Listen! The birds **are singing**.

You can see that these actions are happening right now and they are temporary actions, normally for a short period of time.

2. To talk about something that is happening AROUND the time of speaking but not necessarily at that exact moment.

This action is in progress and hasn't finished.

- I **am reading** a great book.

(It doesn't necessarily mean that I am reading a book right at this moment. It refers to this moment of my life. I have started reading this book and I haven't finished it)

- They **are staying** at a local hotel because the roof of their house was damaged during the storm.

(It doesn't necessarily mean they are at the hotel right at this moment. Maybe they are at work right now or somewhere else. This situation is temporary.)

- Jack **is learning** Italian.

(It doesn't necessarily mean he is learning the language right now at a desk with all of his language books. It refers to this moment of his life.)

Common time expressions used with the present continuous are:

- Now, right now, at the moment, still

NOTE: Sometimes the **present continuous** is called the **present progressive** in some workbooks or lessons.

Now let's compare the two tenses together...

Present Simple vs Present Continuous

Here are the sentences from the beginning of this lesson.

- I **speak** English
- I **am speaking**

We say *I speak English*, because it is a fact. I generally speak English. So we use the Present Simple tense.

We say *I am speaking English* because it refers to what I am doing now. It is a temporary action because in a moment I might start speaking in Spanish. So we use the Present Continuous.

Let's compare more sentences:

- I **live** in England.

We use the Present Simple for things that don't change for a long time. I plan to live in England for a long time and I don't plan to change soon. It is more or less permanent. But if I say:

- I **am living** in London at the moment.

I used the present continuous because this situation is temporary. Next month I plan to live in a different city.

Another example:

- It **rains** a lot in winter.

We use the present simple because this is a fact, or is generally true.

- It **is raining** right now.

We use the present continuous because we are talking about an action that is happening right now. It is in progress. It will not continue forever, it is temporary. Tomorrow it might be sunny.

Compare these two sentences:

- He **is biting** his nails because he is nervous.
- He always **bites** his nails when he's nervous.

The first sentence shows the action that is happening now... he is biting his nails right now.

The second sentence uses the present simple because it is talking about his habit, sometime that he does when he is nervous. Notice how we use the present simple tense with the adverb of frequency, always.

Another example:

- He **teaches** at a local school.

That is what he does for a job from Monday to Friday every week. This is his routine.

- He **is teaching** business at the local school this week.

It is possibly a temporary job he has this week because next week he will return to his normal job or maybe he will teach at another school next week.

Affirmative, Negative, Questions

Let's compare the **present simple** and **present continuous** in affirmative sentences, negative sentences and in questions.

Here are two affirmative sentences:

- I **eat** cereal every day. (This is my habit, my routine)
- I **am eating** cereal right now. (This is an action happening now)

Let's look at the negative form:

- I **do not** eat cereal every day. (No, sometimes I have pancakes for breakfast)
- I **am not** eating cereal right now. (No, I am eating broccoli)

We use DO NOT or DOES NOT to make negative sentences in the **present simple**. Remember, we can use the contractions **don't** and **doesn't**.

We add NOT between to be and the verb to make negative sentences in the **present continuous**.

And making questions:

- **Do you eat** cereal every day? (Is this your habit or routine?)
- **Are you eating** cereal right now? (Is this what you are doing right now?)

We use DO or DOES to make questions in the present simple tense.

We change the order of the subject (pronoun) and the conjugation of the verb To Be when making questions in the present continuous tense.

Questions – Same verbs, different meanings

Questions can have the same verb but its meaning changes depending on if the question is in the present simple or present continuous. For example:

- What do you **do**? = What is your job?
- What **are** you **doing**? = What (action) are you doing at the moment?
- What do you **read**? = What type of books do you like to read?
- What **are** you **reading**? = What is the name of the book you are reading right now?

Exercise 01:

Complete the sentence with the verb given, choose the present simple, or present continuous

1. Look! He (leave)_____ the house.
2. Quiet please! I (write)_____ a test.
3. She usually (walk)_____ to school.

4. Every Sunday we (go)_____ to see my grandparents.

5. He often (go)_____ to the cinema.

6. We (play)_____ Monopoly at the moment.

7. (watch / he)_____ the news regularly?

Exercise 02:

Complete the sentence with the verb given, choose the present simple, or present continuous

1. I_____ overtime this month because I_____ up to buy a new car. (*work,save*).

2. He_____ thirty cigarettes a day but at the moment he_____ very hard to stop.
(*smoke, try*)

3. The sun_____ in the east and_____ in the west. (*rise,set*)

4. She usually_____ languages very fast but she_____ problems with Chinese at the moment. (*learn, have*)

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