

-고 있었다

was doing — past progressive

The past form of -고 있다. Says something was under way at a particular past moment, usually when something else interrupted it.

HOW TO ATTACH IT

Any action verb	-고 있었다	자다 → 자고 있었어요
ㄹ stems keep the ㄹ	-고 있었다	만들다 → 만들고 있었어요
Needs a reference point	-았/었을 때 etc.	전화했을 때 자고 있었어요
Honorific	-고 계셨다	주무시고 계셨어요
Simple past instead	-았/었-	어제 공부했어요
Resulting state instead	-아/어 있었다	앉아 있었어요

WHEN TO USE IT

Attach -고 있었다 to any action verb stem. Nothing changes, ㄹ stays, and the tense sits on 있다.

It needs a reference point — a moment in the past at which the action was in progress. Most often another clause supplies it: 전화했을 때 자고 있었어요.

Without that anchor, the plain past is what Korean uses. "I studied yesterday" is 어제 공부했어요, not 공부하고 있었어요 — and this is where English speakers over-apply the progressive.

Repeated past habits also take the plain past: 작년에 매일 운동했어요, not 운동하고 있었어요.

With an honoured subject, 있다 becomes 계시다: 주무시고 계셨어요.

IN USE

- 1 전화했을 때 자고 있었어요.
I was asleep when you called.
- 2 제가 도착했을 때 다들 기다리고 있었어요.
Everyone was waiting when I arrived.
- 3 그때 저는 저녁을 만들고 있었어요.
I was making dinner at the time.
- 4 비가 올 때 밖에서 놀고 있었어요.
We were playing outside when it started raining.
- 5 할아버지는 신문을 읽고 계셨어요.
Grandfather was reading the newspaper.

- 6 한참 찾고 있었는데 가방 안에 있었어요.
I'd been looking for ages, and it was in my bag.

COMPARED WITH

-았/었-

The plain past reports that something happened; -고 있었다 reports it as unfinished at a given moment. Without a reference point, the plain past is correct.

어제 공부했어요. (I studied) / 전화했을 때 공부하고 있었어요. (I was studying when you called)

-아/어 있었다

-고 있었다 is the action running; -아/어 있었다 is the state it left. Verbs of position take the second.

앉고 있었어요. (was sitting down) / 앉아 있었어요. (was seated)

-던

-던 also describes an unfinished past action, but as a modifier before a noun rather than as a predicate.

읽고 있었어요. (I was reading it) / 읽던 책 (the book I was reading)

WATCH OUT

X 어제 세 시간 동안 공부하고 있었어요.

O 어제 세 시간 동안 공부했어요.

A completed stretch of study is a plain past event. -고 있었다 needs a moment at which the action was interrupted or observed.

X 제가 도착했을 때 다들 앉고 있었어요.

O 제가 도착했을 때 다들 앉아 있었어요.

앉고 있었어요 means they were in the act of lowering themselves into chairs. For people already seated, use -아/어 있었다.

X 할아버지는 신문을 읽고 있었어요.

O 할아버지는 신문을 읽고 계셨어요.

With an honoured subject, 있다 rises to 계시다 so the sentence matches throughout.