

The Progressive (or Continuous) Tense

A very common mistake for German-speaking English learners (and others, I promise) is to confuse the progressive tense (“I am learning English”) with the simple present tense (“I learn English”).

This is understandable: in German, there is a word for the progressive, *Verlaufsform*, but no corresponding tense in everyday German.

Understanding the progressive isn't the easiest thing for an English-learner to do, but it will go a long way towards making his English sound more natural. Also, understanding the different 'feelings' communicated will help him understand more of the meanings communicated to him in English.

The Simple Present

The best place to begin a comparison is with the simple present itself. The simple present is the first form of a verb that students of English normally learn. (“I drink coffee.” or “He likes my sister.” Remember: *'He, she, it, 's' muss mit.'*) **We use the simple present** not to indicate what we're doing in the moment, but **to indicate the things we generally do**. For example, if you're at work and stone-cold sober¹, you can still say “I drink beer” to your boss. Why? Because that sentence only means that it's something you do in general, not that you're doing it at that exact moment.

In negative sentences², the simple present is negated with the words “don't” and “doesn't” (they're short for “do not” and “does not.”) For example: “I drink beer, but I don't drink wine.” Both explain simple what you generally do or don't do, not what you're doing at the moment.

Other examples of the simple present are:

- I love you. (Not just at the moment, but in general.)
- He reminds me of my father.
- My mother doesn't swim.
- I don't know that man.
- Do you have the time?
- I am an American.

1 “Sober” is the word we use for 'not under the influence of alcohol or drugs.' Because people sometimes still say they're sober after only one beer, we use 'stone cold sober' in everyday English to convey that there's no alcohol in us, whatsoever.

2 A “negative sentence” doesn't have to be a depressing sentence. It's just a sentence with the word 'not' in it. It describes what 'isn't the case.' “I don't like grammar,” is a negative sentence my students are fond of.

Practice: Answer the following questions with the simple present.

1. What do you do for fun?
2. What are your hobbies?
3. What do you do at work?
4. What kind of music do you listen to?
5. Where do you live?

The Progressive

In contrast, the **progressive is used to describe what we are doing at that exact moment**. If you use the simple present to say “I don't drink coffee,” it means that, generally coffee isn't a part of your day. But, if you've had a long day, you can say “I ’m drinking coffee, but only to stay awake.” The verb tense means that you're doing it right now, and whoever you're talking to will understand that it isn't a general rule.

The **progressive is formed with the verb 'to be'** ('am,' 'is,' or 'are,' depending on the subject) **and the -ing form** of the verb in the present tense. Some examples include:

- I ’m working as fast as I can.
- What is making that sound?
- The ducks aren't sitting on the pond.
- We ’re not driving my father's old car.

It's important to remember that, when you're using the progressive, the be-verb is matched to the subject. The actual verb always ends in -ing. Also, it's the be-verb that is negated in negative sentences. Some examples include:

- You ’re not trying very hard.
- The weather is changing.
- Where are we going?

So far, so good. The thing to remember is that the **simple present is for general actions**, and the **progressive is for actions in that moment**. When you use the progressive, you're telling your listener that the action isn't finished.

Practice: Complete the sentences with the verb in the progressive tense.

6. Where _____ that smell _____ from? (come)
7. I _____ English. (learn)
8. My brother _____ to physics. (study)
9. His family _____ right now. (not eat)
10. Udo _____ on the phone. (talk)
11. We _____ German, now. (not speak)
12. I _____, at the moment. (not swim)
13. We _____ for the remote control. Have you seen it?. (look)

Complete the following sentences with the correct form (simple present or continuous) of the verb.

14. He _____ his mother. (respect)
15. I _____ right now, can I call you back? (eat)
16. She _____ a BMW, I think she has an Audi. (not drive)
17. They _____ on my nerves, I wish they would stop! (get)³
18. That noise? That's my sister. She _____ the piano. (practice)
19. _____ you _____ the piano? (play)
20. Smells good, mom. What _____ you _____ ? (make)
21. Udo Jürgens _____ the greatest singer, ever! (be)
22. I'm fine. I _____ your help. (not need)

³ “to get on someone's nerves” is to bother them. We use this phrase often when the person isn't *trying* to bother us, but it simple doing something very annoying. I use it a lot when children are singing and banging pots and pans. The kids just want to have fun, but they really get on my nerves.

The Progressive for Unfinished and Ongoing Actions

If we only used the continuous to describe what we're doing in the exact moment that we're talking, then the only verb that would need a continuous form is 'talking.' ("I am talking to you.") Of course, we know that's not the case. We also use the continuous to talk about things that are **unfinished or ongoing, but that we aren't doing at the moment.**

For example, I might be talking to a stranger I met on the tram. We talk about music, and I say "I like German music. I'm listening to a lot of Udo Jürgens." The sentence is perfect, even though there's no music at all in the tram.⁴ I can use the progressive because it implies that Udo's music is an ongoing taste of mine in music. It's important to note that the **progressive implies a phase that will end**, and the **simple present indicates a general taste of mine**. What does that mean? "I like German music." is a general statement, and when I use the simple present, I'm indicating that I don't expect my taste in music to change anytime, soon. But "I'm listening to a lot of Udo Jürgens" indicates two things: **1)** that I'm in the middle of a phase and **2)** the phase will end. If I thought Udo's music was a permanent part of what I am, I'd use the simple present: "I listen to Udo Jürgens."

It sounds confusing, but it doesn't have to be. Consider Bob: Bob is a construction worker. To describe the things he does every day at his job, Bob uses the simple present: "I build and renovate houses. I install windows, paint, and wallpaper⁵ the interiors of my customers' houses." Each of these things are things that he generally does at work, so he uses the simple present. (For a construction worker, Bob speaks very good English.)

Imagine, though, that Bob meets a friend in the bar on the weekend. He obviously isn't working, but he wants to talk about the project he's working on. Here, Bob would use the continuous. "I'm painting a house pink and installing orange windows. I'm glad I don't have to live there." He uses the continuous, because he's started the painting and installing, but isn't finished, yet. It's an ongoing project.

Practice: Complete the sentences with the correct forms (simple present or continuous) of the verbs in parenthesis.

23. The BMW I normally _____ is in the garage, so I _____ a rented Audi. (drive)
24. I'm a secretary. I _____ a lot at work. (type)

4 I say there's no music, because I'm not one of the annoying people who listens to music on their cell phones in public transportation. I consider that very rude.

5 "Wallpaper" Is the word in English for the paper that you glue to the walls. And, when you glue to the paper to the walls, we say you're 'wallpapering.' It's a verb, too.

25. I normally _____ letters, but now I _____ a book for my boss. He's crazy! (type)
26. My hobbies? I _____ old records. At the moment I _____ for anything by the Beatles. (collect / look)
27. My co-workers _____ when they're working! This week they _____ songs from Musicals! Crazy people! (sing)
28. I guess you could call me a runner. I _____ 15km a week these days. (run)

Practice: Take a moment to write down a description of your day. What are the things you generally do at work? At home?

Practice: Now, think about what you're doing this week. What projects are you working on at work? At home?

Verbs Not Used in the Progressive

Sometimes, it seems that grammar just *has* to be difficult. When you think you've started understanding when to use the progressive and when not to, you find out that **there are some verbs that aren't used in the progressive**. Why? These verbs describe things that are *generally* true. For example: either you know French or you don't. You can't 'be knowing' French for just a moment. 'Know' is one of the verbs on the list. But also:

- | | | |
|--------------|--------------|------------|
| ● know | ● believe | ● surprise |
| ● hear | ● desire | ● resemble |
| ● appreciate | ● realize | ● prefer |
| ● dislike | ● recognize | ● exist |
| ● fear | ● suppose | ● please |
| ● hate | ● understand | ● contain |
| ● like | ● belong | ● love |
| ● own | ● want | |

What Comes Next?

Congratulations! You've made it through six pages of grammar, that's no small feat!⁶ So, are you a master of the progressive tense? Probably not. In this worksheet we've only talked about the progressive the present tense. (And it took us six pages. Wow.) You still need to work on the past and future forms of the progressive. Fortunately, there are worksheets for that, too.

Have you done the exercises so far? They're good practice. Just be sure you check your answers with the solutions at the end: you don't want to practice something wrong. Un-learning something and re-learning it is twice as hard as learning it right in the first place.

If you haven't done the practice exercises, **my advice is do them now**. Here are some more exercises, but they'll help if you wait a day or three and then look at them again. If you can complete the exercises without looking at the explanations, then I'd say you understand this material! Go ahead and get started on the progressive in the past, and then the future.

More Practice: Complete the sentences with the correct form of the verb:

1. Normally, I only _____ English, but now I _____
German. (speak / learn)
2. Where _____ you _____? Can I _____ with you?
(go / come)
3. What _____ you _____ to do in New York City? (want)
4. I _____ that's a good idea. We _____ Russian!
(not think / not speak)
5. My name is Toby, I _____ from the USA. I _____ German music,
and German food! Now, I _____ in Dresden, Germany, where I
_____ English to some amazing students. (be / like / live / teach)
6. I _____ coffee, anymore. Now I _____
through a phase where I drink Whiskey to wake up! (not drink / go)
7. That's not noise, it's music! I _____ my favorite songs! (sing)

⁶ 'A feat' is an accomplishment. We most often use the word in the phrases 'that's quite a feat,' meaning something was a lot of work or very difficult and 'that's no small feat,' which means the same thing as 'that isn't easy.' And I think that six pages of grammar—in any language—is quite a feat.

8. Udo Jürgens _____ my favorite singer. He _____ a kind of pop that the Germans call 'Schlager.' The amazing thing is that Udo is past the age when I would retire and he _____ still _____! (be / sing / perform)
9. My father _____ it's important to learn math. He _____ a math teacher and, when I go home he _____ me with mini-quizzes! (think / is / bother)
10. My wife _____ for the CIA. As a professional spy she _____ secrets, _____ phone calls and _____ into government offices. Right now, she _____ on a tricky job. She _____ on Schlager singers! (work / steal / record / sneak⁷ / work / spy)
11. Peter Galfenberg is a carpenter. He _____ stairs and doors out of wood. Sometimes he _____ antique furniture. Right now he _____ on an unusual project. He's _____ a tree house for dogs! (make / repair / work / build)

Practice: With the words provided, make a sentence.

13. **Example:** (right now / Paul / pizza / not eat)

“Right now, Paul is not eating pizza.”

14. (at work / Nathan / write a report / at the moment)

15. (my wife / in the garden / water the plants / right now)

16. (as a hobby / I / fix cars. Now / a Trabant / I work on / in my garage)

17. (How / you / make these cookies? They / smell good.)

⁷ 'to sneak' is to move around very quietly and very carefully. Someone who is good at sneaking is never detected!

Solutions:

1. I don't know what you do for fun. The important thing is that, because you *generally* do it for fun, you use the simple present: “I watch movies.” “I play cards.” “I dance.”
2. When you list your hobbies, again, use the simple present. “I swim in the river.” “I read books.” *Or*, you can just say “My hobbies are . . .” and then, in this case, you'd use the -ing form of the verb to list verbs. “My hobbies are swimming, reading, eating, and cooking.”
3. I don't know what you do at work. But if you generally do it, you better have use the simple present.
4. Here, you should have something like “I listen to Udo Jürgens.” Except you want to replace Udo's name with the music that *you* like.
5. I don't know where you live. But I know that you generally live there. So: “I live in Dresden.” is the answer I would give.
6. Where is that smell coming from? (My wife asks me this when I've been jogging. It's her way of telling me to hop in the shower.)
7. I am learning English.
8. My brother is studying physics.
9. His family isn't eating right now.
10. Udo is talking on the phone.
11. We aren't speaking German, now.
12. I'm not swimming a the moment.
13. We're looking for the remote control. Have you seen it?
14. He respects his mother. (Generally, not just right now.)
15. I'm eating right now, can I call you back? ('Right now' was the clue.)
16. She doesn't drive a BMW, I think she has an Audi. (She's not driving now, true, but this it true, generally.)
17. They're getting on my nerves, I wish they would stop! (If 'They get on my nerves,' it means that they *always* get on my nerves. The 'I wish they would stop' is the hint that they *could* stop, if they wanted to. So it's a right-now case of the progressive.)
18. That noise? That's my sister. She's practicing the piano. (If you can hear it, it's now.)
19. Do you play the piano? (Granted, this could be progressive, because there's no hint that the question isn't asking about 'right now.' But, do you normally ask a person if they're playing the piano *right now*, or if they play it at all?)
20. Smells good, mom. What are you making? (If it smells good, she's making it right now.)
21. Udo Jürgens is the greatest singer, ever! (Now, and always. It's a general thing.)

22. I'm fine. I don't need your help. (This one is a little tricky. But the first clue is that I don't need your help now or later. It's general. The tricky part is that we almost never use 'need' in the progressive. (See: verbs we don't use in the progressive.)
23. The BMW I normally drive is in the garage, so I'm driving a rented Audi. (Normally is the hint here.)
24. I'm a secretary. I type a lot at work. (I do it every day.)
25. I normally type letters, but now I'm typing a book for my boss. He's crazy! (Normally and now are the hints in this sentence.)
26. My hobbies? I collect old records. At the moment I'm looking for anything by the Beatles.
27. My co-workers sing when they're working. This week they're singing songs from Musicals! Crazy people!
28. I guess you could call me a runner. I run 15km a week these days. ('These days',⁸ is the clue here, it's about the same as saying 'generally,' though it has a slightly different meaning. If you put 'am running' I have good news: this was a trick question. Both answers fit.)

Solutions to the Practice at the end.

1. Normally I only speak English but now I'm learning German.
2. Where are you going? Can I come with you?
3. What do you want to do in New York City?
4. I don't think that's a good idea. We don't speak Russian!
5. My name is Toby, I am from the USA. I like German music and German food! Now, I live in Dresden, Germany where I teach English to some amazing students. (As important as knowing when to use the progressive is knowing when *not* to use it.)
6. I don't drink coffee, anymore. Now I am going through a a phase where I drink Whiskey to wake up! (This is not a good idea. I tried it when I was a student.)
7. That's not noise, it's music! I am singing my favorite songs!
8. Udo Jürgens is my favorite singer. He sings a kind of pop that the Germans call 'Schlager.' The amazing thing is that Udo is past the age when I would retire and he is still performing!
9. My father thinks it's important to learn math. He is a math teacher and, when I go home he bothers me with mini-quizzes!
10. My wife works for the CIA. As a professional spy she steals secrets, records phone calls, and sneaks into government offices. Right now, she is working on a tricky job. She is

⁸ 'These days' is phrase that refers to the present. If I say I eat a lot of pizza these days, I mean that I eat a lot of pizza, but it wasn't always that way, and it probably won't always be that way.

spying on Schlager singers!

11. Peter Galfenberg is a carpenter. He makes stairs and doors out of wood. Sometimes he repairs antique furniture. Right now he's working on an unusual project. He's building a tree house for dogs!
12. Right now, Paul is not eating pizza. (This one should have been easy. We gave you the answer.)
13. At the moment, Nathan is writing a report at work.
14. My wife is watering the plants in the garden right now.
15. I fix cars as a hobby. Right now I'm working on a Trabant in my garage.
16. How do you make these cookies? They are smelling good. (Here, there's a temptation to use the progressive, but since the cookies are finished (they smell good), you can only ask how they're made in general, not how they're being made right now.)