Grammar Explanation

Using verb tenses to write about the past

When you write about a past event (an action or condition), you need to use a different verb tense depending on the situation you are describing.

• When you describe a past event that happened or was completed during a specific period or time, use the simple past.
  o Example: In 1990, they came to America for a better life and settled in New York.

• When you describe a past event that has occurred during a non-specific time, or has continued to the present, use the present perfect or present perfect progressive.
  o Example: Since they arrived in America, they have learned many new customs.

• When you need to let the reader know that an event had occurred before another past time or event that you mention, use the past perfect for the earlier action.
  o Example: By the time I came to the United States in 1999, I had already learned English.

• When you describe a past action that was in progress while another action occurred or was in progress, use the past progressive.
  o Example: They were doing well and were becoming comfortable with life in America when suddenly a crisis happened in their life.

• When you describe a constant condition or state in the past, do not use a progressive tense.
  o Incorrect: They were needing help when they arrived; since then they have managed to improve their lives.
  o Corrected: They needed help when they arrived; since then they have managed to improve their lives.

Excerpted from: Verb Tenses: Exercise 4