The Simple Past vs. the Past Progressive

Simple Past

1. The simple past is normally used for describing the past such as in story telling.
   a. A quickly finished action or event in the past. [Something that *started* and *ended* quickly.]
      Tom *broke* his camera yesterday.
   b. A longer situation or action in the past. [The simple past suggests that it *started* and *ended* in the past.]
      She *spent* all summer in Canada last year.
2. A repeated event in the past.
   Regularly every summer, Janet *fell* in love.
3. Certain verbs cannot be progressive (nonprogressive verbs).
   They are not ‘action’ verbs, but ‘state / condition’ verbs.
   Tom *had* a big house before he came here. (*Tom was having a big house before he came here.*)

Past Progressive

1. The past progressive is used for *temporary* actions and situations. The past progressive is NOT normally used for longer, more permanent, and repeated actions in the past.
   a. An activity in progress around a particular time. (Neither starting nor ending is mentioned.)
      What were you doing at 5 o’clock yesterday evening?   I was studying in the library.
   b. Past progressive is used to stress that something that was in progress at *every moment during a period of time* in the past.
      I *was practicing* basketball all day last Saturday.
2. The past progressive is often used in narratives for dramatic effects.
3. The past progressive is often used with the simple past. In such a case, the past progressive is used for a ‘background’ event.
   As I *was shopping* at the mall I saw Janet.