

Preterite vs Imperfect: Two Aspects of the Past Tense

Both the preterite and the imperfect are used to narrate in the past. The difference is in the aspect of the past which they are responsible for describing. The preterite is used to describe punctual events. That means actions or states that are describes as specific points in time in the past. The imperfect is used to describe states and ongoing activities in the past.

THE PRETERITE

The preterite describes **what happened**. The speaker is trying to communicate to his/her listener that these events began and/or ended in the past.

I. a single instantaneous event or action

Cerré la puerta.
I closed the door.

¿Oíste ese ruido?
Did you hear that noise?

Me puse la camiseta.
I put on the t-shirt.

*Empecé a llorar.
I began to cry

* While the activity may be continuous after it begins, the moment it begins is an instantaneous event.

II. an activity or state of limited duration

Leímos el libro por veinte minutos.

We read the book for 20 minutes.

Estuve enferma ayer, pero hoy me siento mejor.

I was sick yesterday, but today I feel better.

De niño, vivió en España.

As a boy, he lived in Spain (but now he doesn't).

Andaba de compras hasta que se me acabó el dinero.

I was shopping until I ran out of money.

Asistió a la universidad desde 1986 hasta 1990.

She attended the university from 1986 until 1990.

En ese momento, pensó que iba a morir.

At that moment, he thought that he was going to die

III. an action repeated a specific number of times

Me llamó cinco veces.

He called me five times.

Este hombre ganó las elecciones en 1992 y en 1996.

This man won the election in 1992 and 1996

IV. a series of completed events (each one completed before the next begins)

Me levanté, me duché, comí una manzana y salí para clase.
I got up, took a shower, ate an apple and left for class.

Se arrodilló y le dijo a Beatriz que la quería. Luego, le mostró un anillo y ella sonrió.
Finalmente, Jorge le puso el anillo en el dedo de ella.
He knelt down and told Beatriz that he loved her. Then, he showed her a ring and she smiled. Finally, he put the ring on her finger.

V. a reaction showing a beginning/ end of a state or activity (marking the beginning/end point)

Cuando los vi, me puse triste. *When I saw them, I became sad.*

De repente, supe la verdad. *Suddenly, I found out the truth.*

Cuando me dijeron eso, me enojé. *When they told me that, I got angry.*

VI. **some special verbs to remember**

Three verbs are special for a variety of reasons. First, several of them have alternative English translations in the preterite. Second, some of them reflect a change in a state rather than simply describing the state.

Haber (hay): **Hubo** un accidente. **There was (occurred)** an accident.

Saber: **Supe** que iba ayer. **I found out** that he was going yesterday

Conocer: La **conoció** anoche. He **met** her last night.

Querer: **Quiso** hacerlo. She **tried to (attempted to)** do it.

No quise ir con él. I **refused** to go with him.

Poder: **Pude** leerlo ayer. I **could (and did)** read it yesterday.

No pudo recordarlo. He **couldn't (and didn't)** remember it.

Tener (que): ¿**Tuviste** una prueba ayer? **Did you have** a quiz yesterday?
(Did it take place?)

Cuando vi el perro, **tuve** miedo. When I saw the dog, **I got scared.**

THE IMPERFECT

The imperfect describes what something/someone **was like** and what **was happening**. The speaker is trying to communicate the existing conditions when something took place in the past (which is communicated by the preterite). Though it is in the past and so must have begun and possibly ended before the present, the focus of the moment that the speaker is describing is on the duration, or ongoingness, of the state or activity. Some have made the analogy that the preterite is the action being played out on a stage. In such an analogy, the imperfect could be described as the setting or stage direction. But remember that the imperfect does have other functions. OJO: The imperfect in English is sometimes represented with a preterite verb form. Think about the meaning of the verb, not the form.

I. to describe states of being or an ongoing activity

*Eran las cinco de la tarde. *It was five p.m.*

Hacía muchísimo frío. *It was very cold.*

*Tenía dieciséis años. *She was sixteen.*

Leía una revista cuando sonó el teléfono *I was reading a magazine when the telephone rang*

Yo estaba cocinando mientras él estaba lavando los platos. *I was cooking while he was washing the dishes.*

*You can measure time, but it is not constantly beginning and ending –it is continuous. Therefore, the imperfect is used with expressions of time and age.

II. habitual or repeated action (often expressed in English by used to)

No me gustaban las películas de horror. *I didn't use to like horror movies.*

Visitaba a mis parientes todos los veranos. *I visited my relatives every summer.*

III. to talk about a future moment from the perspective of the past

Sabíamos que iba a ser una boda inolvidable. *We knew that it was going to be an unforgettable wedding.*

Me dijo que Elena pensaba venir. *He told me that Elena was planning on coming.*

IV. SOME SPECIAL VERBS

Remember those special verbs that were listed in the preterite discussion? In the imperfect they retain their base meaning that you saw in the present tense.

<u>Haber (hay):</u>	Había mucha gente.	There were (existed) a lot of people.
<u>Saber:</u>	Sabía donde vivía.	I knew where he was living. (I was in a state of blissful knowledge.)
	Sabía tocar bien el piano	He knew how to play the piano well.
<u>Conocer:</u>	Conocía a Guille.	She knew Bill. (She was in a state of acquaintance with him for the moment in which she met him.)
	Sí, conocía el café.	Yes, I was familiar with the café.
<u>Querer:</u>	Quería ir al cine.	I was wanting/wanted to go to the movies.
	No quería ir con él.	I didn't want to go with him.
<u>Poder:</u>	Podía recordar.	I was able to remember.
<u>Tener (que):</u>	Tenía que estudiar.	I had to study. (I was under a personal obligation to study.)
	Tenía un gato.	I used to have a cat.
	¿ Tenías miedo?	Were you scared?

SIEMPRE AND NUNCA WITH THE PRETERITE/IMPERFECT

While one may think that siempre/nunca would be used almost exclusively with the imperfect, just the opposite is true. Siempre and nunca are almost always used with the preterite, the only exception being siempre when the verb of the sentence/clause has a habitual meaning.

Nunca me gustó el hígado con cebolla. Siempre tuve muchos amigos.
I never liked liver and onions. *I always had a lot of friends.*

Siempre jugaba con mis amigos después de la escuela.
I always played with my friends after school.