

Repaso de Verbos en el Imperfecto

el imperfecto de verbos regulares

-ar		-er		-ir	
aba	ábamos	ía	íamos	ía	íamos
abas	abais	ías	íais	ías	íais
aba	aban	ía	ían	ía	ían

bailar		comer		vivir	
bailaba	bailábamos	comía	comíamos	vivía	vivíamos
bailabas	bailabais	comías	comíais	vivías	vivíais
bailaba	bailaban	comía	comían	vivía	vivían

el imperfecto de verbos irregulares

ir		ser		ver	
iba	íbamos	era	éramos	veía	veíamos
ibas	ibais	eras	erais	veías	veíais
iba	iban	era	eran	veía	veían

Usos del Imperfecto y el Pretérito

Although the English simple past in a sentence such as "he ate" can be conveyed in Spanish using either the preterite (*comió*) or the imperfect indicative (*comía*), the two tenses are not interchangeable. In general, the preterite is used when speaking of completed action, that is, when the verb refers to an action that has a clear end. On the other hand, the other past tense is known as an imperfect tense because "imperfect" can also mean "incomplete"; the imperfect indicative is used to refer to an action that doesn't have a specific ending.

The preterite is used:

To tell of something that happened once; actions that can be viewed as single events

- *Fui ayer a la tienda.* (I went to the store yesterday.)
- *Escribí la carta.* (I wrote the letter.)

To tell of something that happened more than once but with a specific end; actions that were repeated a specific number of times

- *Fui ayer a la tienda seis veces.* (I went to the store six times yesterday.)
- *Leyó el libro cinco veces.* (He read the book five times.)

To indicate the beginning or end of a process; to state the beginning or the end of an action

- *Tuvo frío.* (He got cold.)
- *El huracán se terminó a las ocho.* (The hurricane was over at 8.)

To tell actions that occurred during a specific period of time

- *Durante las vacaciones de junio, fui a la playa y nadé varias veces.* (During the vacations in June, I went to the beach and swam many times.)
- *Mis padres vieron la película tres veces el fin de semana.* (My parents saw the movie three times on the weekend.)

To tell actions that were part of a chain of events

- *Ayer comí en casa, vi la televisión y hablé con Fernanda por teléfono.* (I ate home, watched TV and talked on the phone with Fernanda yesterday.)
- *La semana pasada fui a la oficina cinco veces, escribí varias cartas y compré un carro.* (Last week I went to the office five times, I wrote several letters and I bought a car.)

Some words and phrases indicate specific time frames, and therefore signal the use of the preterite.

- ayer** (yesterday)
- anteayer** (the day before yesterday)
- anoche** (last night)
- desde el primer momento** (from the first moment)
- durante dos siglos** (for two centuries)
- el otro día** (the other day)
- en ese momento** (at that moment)
- entonces** (then)
- esta mañana** (this morning)
- esta tarde** (this afternoon)
- la semana pasada** (last week)
- el mes pasado** (last month)
- el año pasado** (last year)
- hace dos días, años** (two days, years ago)
- ayer por la mañana** (yesterday morning)
- ayer por la tarde** (yesterday afternoon)

The imperfect indicative is used:

To tell of past habitual or repeated actions; actions that were repeated habitually

- *Iba a la tienda.* (I used to go to the store.)
- *Leíamos los libros.* (We would read the books.)
- *Lavaban las manos.* (They would wash their hands.)
- *Escribía muchas cartas.* (I wrote many letters.)

To describe a condition, mental state or state of being from the past; to state mental states (usually), physical sensations (usually); to describe the characteristics of people, things or conditions

- *Había una casa aquí.* (There used to be a house here.)
- *Era estúpido.* (He was stupid.)
- *No te conocía.* (I didn't know you.)
- *Quería estar feliz.* (He wanted to be happy.)
- *Tenía frío.* (He was cold.)

To describe an action that occurred over an unspecified time

- *Lavaban los manos.* (They were washing their hands.)
- *Cuando José tocaba el piano, María comía.* (While José was playing the piano, María was eating.)

To indicate time or age in the past; telling time; stating one's age

- *Era la una de la tarde.* (It was 1 p.m.)
- *Tenía 43 años.* (She was 43 years old.)

For actions that "set the stage" for another past action

- *Eran las siete de la mañana y yo estaba muy cansado.* (It was 7 a.m. and I was very tired)
- *Él siempre se sentaba a la mesa y leía un libro mientras esperaba la comida.* (He always sat at the table and read a book while he waited for the food.)

Other words and phrases indicate repetitive, vague or non-specific time frames, and therefore signal the use of the imperfect.

- a menudo** (often)
- a veces** (sometimes)
- cada día** (every day)
- cada semana** (every week)
- cada mes** (every month)
- cada año** (every year)
- con frecuencia** (frequently)
- de vez en cuando** (from time to time)
- en aquella época** (at that time)
- frecuentemente** (frequently)
- generalmente** (usually)
- muchas veces** (many times)
- mucho** (a lot)
- nunca** (never)
- por un rato** (for awhile)
- siempre** (always)
- tantas veces** (so many times)
- todas las semanas** (every week)
- todos los días** (every day)
- todo el tiempo** (all the time)
- varias veces** (several times)

Other distinctions:

Background — The imperfect indicative is frequently used to provide the background for an event that is described using the preterite.

- *Era* [imperfect] *la una de la tarde cuando comió* [preterite]. (It was 1 p.m. when she ate.)
- *Yo escribía* [imperfect] *cuando llegaste* [preterite]. (I was writing when you arrived.)

Differences in translated meaning — Because of the way the two tenses are used, some verbs can be translated using differing words in English depending on the tense in Spanish. This is especially true when the preterite is used to indicate the beginning or end of a process.

- *Conocí al presidente.* (I met the president.)
- *Conocía al presidente.* (I knew the president.)
- *Tuvo frío.* (He got cold.)
- *Tenía frío.* (He was cold.)
- *Supe escuchar.* (I found out how to listen.)
- *Sabía escuchar.* (I knew how to listen.)

Let's look at some examples:

Preterite (completed action)	Imperfect (description, scene)
<i>Comí la cena.</i>	<i>Comía la cena...</i>
I ate my dinner (and I finished it)	I was eating my dinner...[when something happened] -or- I used to eat my dinner...

<i>Tuvo que devolver la camisa</i>	<i>Tenía que devolver la camisa</i>
She had to -and did- return the shirt.	She had to return the shirt (She was supposed to return it - but we don't know if she did or not.)

Some verbs have different meanings in the Imperfect and Preterite forms:

	Preterite (completed action)	Imperfect (description, scene)
<i>Conocer</i>	to have met someone	to have known someone
<i>Saber</i>	to have found out something	to have known something
<i>Querer</i>	tried	wanted
<i>No Querer</i>	refused	didn't want
<i>Poder</i>	managed to (succeeded)	was able to (capable of)
<i>No Poder</i>	failed to	wasn't able to (not capable)

Examples of how these verbs change in meaning:

Preterite (completed action)	Imperfect (description, scene)
<i>Quise hacerlo pero no pude.</i>	<i>Quería ir a la playa cada fin de semana. Y por no trabajar los fines de semana, podía ir frecuentemente.</i>
I tried to do it but I failed (to do it)	I wanted to go to the beach every weekend. And because I didn't work weekends, I was able to go frequently.
<i>La conocí el año pasado.</i>	<i>Nos conocíamos por tres meses antes de casarnos.</i>
I met her last year.	We knew each other for three months before marrying.

Final note:

Some of the sentences on this page could be stated in the other tense with a change of meaning. For example, while "*escribía muchas cartas*" would be the typical way of saying "I wrote many letters," as that is something that typically would take place over an unspecified period of time, one also might say "*escribí muchas cartas.*" But the meaning of the sentence, not readily translatable without a context to English, would change to indicate that the speaker was referring to a specific point in time. For example, if you were talking about writing many letters while you were on a particular trip, you might use the preterite form.

Preterite or Imperfect in two simple steps

You need "two YESes" to use the preterite

Question 1: From a practical perspective, can I put the action in my calendar?

If NO, use the imperfect
If YES, ask question 2

Question 2: Was the action finished?

If NO, use the imperfect
If YES, use the preterite