

What the imperfect does and when to use it

The imperfect (el imperfecto) describes ongoing, habitual or background actions in the past. Use it when you want to talk about:

- **Habitual actions:** things you used to do regularly.
- **Background description:** time, weather, physical and emotional states.
- **Ongoing actions:** actions that were in progress with no defined beginning or end.
- **Simultaneous actions:** two or more actions happening at the same time in the past.

A short childhood story in Spanish (examples of the imperfect)

Cuando era niño, mi vida pasó por muchos cambios. Nací en Maryland, donde mi padre trabajaba como profesor de ingeniería en la academia naval. Cuando tenía cinco años, nos mudamos a Nuevo México, donde mi padre había aceptado un puesto en un laboratorio. Antes de mudarnos a Nuevo México, los cinco vivíamos juntos: mi madre, mi padre, mi hermana, mi hermano y yo. Todos los sábados iba a la biblioteca en Annapolis con mi padre. Después íbamos a un restaurante a almorzar. Me gustaba mucho Nuevo México. Pasaba más tiempo al aire libre por el clima; siempre hacía sol. Nadaba mucho y íbamos a las montañas. Pasábamos los fines de semana visitando lagos, monumentos y otros estados como California y Arizona. También tuve la oportunidad de probar muchos alimentos nuevos, como comida mexicana: enchiladas, tamales, burritos, y muchos platos únicos de Nuevo México, como sopapillas o estofado de chile verde.

Why these verbs use the imperfect (with English explanations)

Look at the verbs in the story and why the imperfect was chosen:

- **Cuando era niño** — **era** is imperfect because it describes a general state or condition in the past: being a child.
- **mi padre trabajaba** — **trabajaba** is imperfect because it describes an ongoing job or background situation.
- **Cuando tenía cinco años** — **tenía** is imperfect for age, which is always expressed with the imperfect.
- **los cinco vivíamos** — **vivíamos** indicates a habitual living arrangement over time.
- **Todos los sábados iba / Después íbamos** — habitual weekend activities, so imperfect.
- **Me gustaba / Pasaba / hacía / nadaba** — descriptions of preferences, repeated actions and weather use the imperfect.
- **nos mudamos** and **tuve la oportunidad** — these are specific completed events, so they use the preterite (**nos mudamos**) or preterite phrase (**tuve** + infinitive).
- **mi padre había aceptado** — this is the past perfect (pluperfect) used to show an action that had happened before another past event.

Common imperfect endings

Memorise these endings for regular verbs:

- **-ar verbs:** -aba, -abas, -aba, -ábamos, -abais, -aban
- **-er / -ir verbs:** -ía, -ías, -ía, -íamos, -íais, -ían

Practice tasks

1. Fill the blanks with the correct imperfect form.
 1. Cuando yo (ser) _____ niño, (jugar) _____ en el parque todos los días.
 2. Mi abuela siempre (cocinar) _____ sopa los domingos.
 3. Mientras tú (leer) _____, yo (hacer) _____ la tarea.
 4. Antes, nosotros (vivir) _____ cerca del lago.
 5. Ellos (tener) _____ diez años cuando empezaron la escuela.
2. Translate into Spanish using the imperfect where appropriate.
 1. I used to swim a lot when I lived in New Mexico.
 2. It was always sunny and warm.
 3. Every Saturday we went to the library.
3. Decide if the sentence should use imperfect or preterite and rewrite it

correctly:

1. The family moved to New Mexico and they lived together for two years. (choose forms)
2. I tried new foods last summer. (choose forms)
4. Write a short paragraph (5-7 sentences) about your childhood. Use at least five imperfect verbs. Focus on habits, weather, and background details.

Answer key and model answers

Here are suggested answers. Use them to check your work and understand choices.

1. Fill the blanks:

1. Cuando yo **era** niño, **jugaba** en el parque todos los días.
2. Mi abuela siempre **cocinaba** sopa los domingos.
3. Mientras tú **leías**, yo **hacía** la tarea.
4. Antes, nosotros **vivíamos** cerca del lago.
5. Ellos **tenían** diez años cuando empezaron la escuela.

2. Translations:

1. Yo **nadaba** mucho cuando vivía en Nuevo México.
2. **Siempre hacía** sol y calor. (or **Siempre estaba** soleado y cálido.)
3. Cada sábado **íbamos** a la biblioteca.

3. Imperfect vs preterite:

1. The family moved to New Mexico and they lived together for two years.

Correct: La familia **se mudó** a Nuevo México y **vivió** allí por dos años.

Explanation: **se mudó** is preterite (completed move), and **vivió** can be preterite if you frame it as a specific period; you could also use **vivía** to stress habitual background.

2. I tried new foods last summer.

Correct: El verano pasado **probé** comidas nuevas.

Explanation: a single completed action uses the preterite.

4.

Writing task:

No model answer here. Make sure your paragraph includes five imperfect verbs (for example: era, jugaba, iba, comía, hacía).

Final tips

- Use the imperfect for age, weather, time, feelings and habitual actions.
- When in doubt, ask whether the action had a clear beginning and end. If not, the imperfect is usually correct.
- Practice by telling short stories about your childhood and highlighting the verbs you use.

Building Proficiency for World Language Learners: 100+ High-Interest Activities

Discover over 100 dynamic activities to make world language learning interactive and fun. I wrote this book with some of my favorite activities for educators aiming to build proficiency with high-impact strategies.

[Learn more and get your copy here.](#)

5 Weeks of No and Low Prep Fun

Need quick, engaging activities for your class? This free guide includes **25 no-prep and low-prep ideas** to save time while keeping students excited about learning.

[Download your free copy now.](#)

100s of Videos to Learn Spanish

Gain access to an extensive collection of videos for self-paced Spanish learning.

[Browse the videos.](#)