

The Preterite vs. Imperfect

(El Pretérito Indefinido vs. El Pretérito Imperfecto)

Spanish has two main past tenses—the **preterite** and the **imperfect**—and both are used to talk about actions that happened in the past. However, they highlight **different perspectives** on those actions. The preterite focuses on **completed events** with clear beginnings or endings, while the imperfect describes **ongoing, habitual, or background actions** that set the scene.

Understanding when to use each tense is essential for telling stories, describing past events, and communicating naturally in Spanish. Mastery of both forms allows learners to paint vivid pictures of the past with clarity and detail.

1) The Core Difference

- The **preterite** expresses **what happened** — *completed* actions, events, or changes.
- The **imperfect** expresses **what was happening** — *ongoing, repeated, or background* actions.

Think of it this way:

- **Preterite = snapshot / summary**
- **Imperfect = background / setting**

Example:

Yo estudiaba cuando mi mamá entró.

I was studying when my mom came in.

→ **Estudiaba** (imperfect): ongoing action

→ **Entró** (preterite): completed, interrupting action

2) The Preterite: Completed Actions

Use the **preterite** when the action:

- **Began or ended** at a specific time

- **Happened once** or a specific number of times
- **Interrupted** another ongoing action
- **Moved the story forward** (plot events)

Examples:

- *Ayer comí pizza.* → I ate pizza yesterday.
- *Fuimos al cine el sábado.* → We went to the movies on Saturday.
- *El teléfono sonó.* → The phone rang.
- *Viví en México tres años.* → I lived in Mexico for three years.

Key Idea: Preterite = clear time frame, completed event.

3) The Imperfect: Ongoing or Habitual Actions

Use the **imperfect** when the action:

- **Used to happen regularly**
- **Was ongoing** (no known start or end)
- **Describes** conditions, people, weather, age, or time
- **Sets the scene or background**

Examples:

- *Cuando era niño, jugaba con mis amigos.* → When I was a child, I used to play with my friends.
- *Estaba cansado.* → I was tired.
- *Eran las ocho y hacía frío.* → It was 8:00 and it was cold.
- *Siempre íbamos al parque los domingos.* → We used to go to the park every Sunday.

Key Idea: Imperfect = ongoing, descriptive, habitual.

4) Quick Comparison Chart

Use	Preterite	Imperfect
Completed action	<i>Ayer comí tacos.</i>	—
Repeated / habitual	—	<i>Siempre comía tacos.</i>

Specific moment	<i>A las ocho empezó la clase.</i>	<i>Eran las ocho. (time)</i>
Action with clear start/end	<i>Viví allí tres años.</i>	<i>Vivía allí. (no clear duration)</i>
Interrupting action	<i>Sonó el teléfono.</i>	<i>Hablaba por teléfono.</i>
Background description	—	<i>El día estaba soleado.</i>
Sequence of events	<i>Entré, saludé, me senté.</i>	—
Emotions / mental states	(change of emotion) <i>Me puse triste.</i>	(ongoing) <i>Estaba triste.</i>

5) Signal Words

Preterite Indicators

Expression	Translation
ayer	yesterday
anoche	last night
el lunes pasado	last Monday
una vez	once
de repente	suddenly
entonces	then
por fin	finally
hace (time)	(time) ago
en ese momento	at that moment

Imperfect Indicators

Expression	Translation
siempre	always
generalmente	generally
a menudo	often
mientras	while
todos los días / años	every day / year
de vez en cuando	from time to time
antes	before

muchas veces many times
cuando era niño when I was a child

6) Interruptions and Background Actions

When **two past actions** occur together:

Function	Tense	Example
Background / ongoing action	Imperfect	<i>Yo estudiaba...</i>
Interrupting / completed action	Preterite	<i>...cuando mi mamá entró.</i>

Combined Example:

Yo leía cuando sonó el teléfono.
I was reading when the phone rang.

Tip:

If you can ask **“What was happening?”** → Imperfect

If you can ask **“What happened?”** → Preterite

7) Descriptions vs. Events

Type	Example	Tense
Description	<i>El hotel era grande y bonito.</i>	Imperfect
Event	<i>El hotel abrió en 1990.</i>	Preterite

Type	Example	Tense
Mental / emotional state	<i>Estaba nervioso.</i>	Imperfect
Change in state	<i>Me puse nervioso.</i>	Preterite

8) Storytelling Example

El sábado pasado:

Era un día bonito. Hacía sol y los pájaros cantaban.
(It was a beautiful day. It was sunny, and the birds were singing.)
De repente, empezó a llover.

(Suddenly, it started to rain.)

Corrimos a casa y vimos una película.

(We ran home and watched a movie.)

The **imperfect** sets the scene and describes conditions.

The **preterite** tells the completed, main events.

9) Meaning Changes Between Tenses

Some verbs change meaning depending on the tense used:

Verb	Imperfect Meaning	Preterite Meaning
conocer	knew (was familiar with)	met (for the first time)
saber	knew (information)	found out / learned
querer	wanted	tried (or refused - <i>no quiso</i>)
poder	was able to / could	managed to / succeeded
tener	used to have / had	got / received

Examples:

- *Conocía a Pedro.* → I knew Pedro.
- *Conocí a Pedro ayer.* → I met Pedro yesterday.
- *Quería ayudar.* → I wanted to help.
- *Quise ayudar.* → I tried to help.

10) Quick Decision Flow

Ask yourself these questions:

1 Is the action finished / completed?

→ **Preterite**

2 Did it happen repeatedly or habitually?

→ **Imperfect**

3 Was it a background description?

→ **Imperfect**

4 Did it interrupt another action?

→ **Preterite**

5 Does it have a definite beginning or end?

→ **Preterite**

6 Was it continuous, emotional, or descriptive?

→ **Imperfect**

11) Practice: Choose the Correct Tense

Fill in the blanks with either **preterite** or **imperfect** forms.

1. Cuando era pequeño, yo _____ (ir) al parque todos los días.
2. Ayer, nosotros _____ (visitar) a mi abuela.
3. Mientras mi madre _____ (cocinar), mi padre _____ (leer) el periódico.
4. De repente, el gato _____ (saltar) por la ventana.
5. Siempre _____ (llover) en abril.
6. A las ocho _____ (empezar) la película.
7. Mi familia _____ (vivir) en España cuando yo _____ (tener) diez años.
8. En ese momento, yo no _____ (saber) qué hacer.
9. Cada verano nosotros _____ (viajar) a la playa.
10. El año pasado _____ (comprar) un coche nuevo.

Answers:

1. iba
2. visitamos
3. cocinaba / leía
4. saltó
5. llovía
6. empezó
7. vivía / tenía
8. sabía
9. viajábamos
10. compré

12) Practice Paragraph

Transform the following paragraph by correctly using both tenses:

Cuando yo (ser) niño, siempre (ir) al campo con mis abuelos. Ellos (tener) una casa muy bonita. Un día (haber) una tormenta muy fuerte. Nosotros (estar) asustados, pero luego todo (terminar) bien.

Answer:

Cuando yo **era** niño, siempre **iba** al campo con mis abuelos. Ellos **tenían** una casa muy bonita. Un día **hubo** una tormenta muy fuerte. Nosotros **estábamos** asustados, pero luego todo **terminó** bien.

13) Visual Summary: The Big Picture

Preterite	Imperfect
Completed action	Ongoing action
Series of events	Habitual actions
Interrupting action	Background / setting
Specific time frame	No clear time frame
“What happened”	“What was happening”
<i>Fui al cine.</i>	<i>I went to the movies.</i>

14) Common Pitfalls

Fui a la escuela todos los días. → *Iba a la escuela todos los días.* (habitual)
Era una vez cuando conocí a Juan. → *Había una vez un niño...* (description)
Estuve cansado. → *Estaba cansado.* (state, ongoing)
Tenía un accidente. → *Tuve un accidente.* (completed event)

15) Quick Story Practice

El año pasado (ir) a España. (Ser) un viaje increíble. Cada día (caminar) por las calles y (comer) tapas. Una noche, (perder) mi cartera, pero un camarero (encontrar) y (devolver) todo. (Estar) muy agradecido.

Answer:

El año pasado **fui** a España. **Fue** un viaje increíble. Cada día **caminaba** por las calles y **comía** tapas. Una noche, **perdí** mi cartera, pero un camarero **encontró** y **devolvió** todo. **Estaba** muy agradecido.

Summary: Key to Mastering Preterite vs. Imperfect

Question	Answer → Tense
What happened?	Preterite
What used to happen?	Imperfect
What was going on?	Imperfect
What interrupted?	Preterite
What describes the setting?	Imperfect
What moves the story forward?	Preterite

Mastering the contrast between **preterite** and **imperfect** brings your Spanish storytelling to life — giving your speech and writing nuance, rhythm, and depth.

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