Preterite vs Imperfect: A Beginner’s Guide to the Past Tense in Spanish

Ready for a blast from the past? As you may know, Spanish has two past tenses: preterite and imperfect. It’s often tricky to know which to use when, since they both refer to actions in the past. Fortunately, several general guidelines exist to help you realize when to use preterite vs imperfect.

It’s also helpful to know which Spanish phrases trigger the use of either the preterite or the imperfect, so we’ll take a look at those later.

Preterite vs Imperfect Conjugation Rules

The preterite tells you precisely when something happened in the past, while the imperfect tells you in general terms when an action took place with no definite ending. Here’s a quick look at how to conjugate regular verbs in the preterite and imperfect forms.

Be sure to check out our post on All You Ever Needed to Know About Spanish Simple Past Tense Verbs for a thorough rundown of both regular and irregular preterite verb conjugations.

Preterite: Regular -ar Verbs

-é
-aste
-ó
-amos
-aron

For example: hablar (to talk) becomes yo hablé, tú hablaste, él/ella/Ud. habló, nosotros hablamos, and ellos/Uds. hablaron
Preterite: Regular -er and -ir Verbs

-í
-iste
-ió
-imos
-ieron

Examples

Correr (to run): corrió, corriste, corrió, corrimos, corrieron

Abrir (to open): abrí, abriste, abrió, abrimos, abrieron

Imperfect: Regular -ar Verbs

-aba
-abas
-aba
-ábamos
-abais
-aban

So, hablar in this form becomes hablaba, hablabas, hablaba, hablábamos, hablaban.

Imperfect: Regular -er and -ir Verbs

-ía
-ías
-ía
-íamos
-ían

Examples

Correr (to run): corria, corriás, corría, corriamos, corrían

Abrir (to open): abría, abriás, abría, abríamos, abrían

**El Preterito**

**Phrases that Trigger the Preterite**

A handful of words and phrases indicate specific time frames that signal the use of the preterite (vs imperfect). Let’s take a look at some of them!

*una vez* – one time/once

*el otro día* – the other day

*ayer* – yesterday

*anoche* – last night

*la semana pasada* – last week

*el mes pasado* – last month

*el año pasado* – last year

*en ese momento* – at that moment

*durante (cinco) siglos* – for (five) centuries

*desde el primer momento* – from the first moment

*ayer por la tarde* – yesterday afternoon

*hoy por la mañana* – this morning
hace (diez) años – (ten) years ago

hace (tres) días – (three) days ago

Verbs that (Almost) Always Use the Preterite

Furthermore, verbs used to discuss events with a certain beginning and end are almost always used in the preterite. *Por ejemplo:*

casarse – to marry

graduarse – to graduate

cumplir años – to have a birthday

llegar – to arrive

darse cuenta de – to realize

morir – to die

decidir – to decide

nacer – to be born

descubrir – to discover

salir – to leave
El Preterito Imperfecto

On the other hand, you’ll be using the imperfect tense to talk about past actions without a definite end. Perhaps they are yet to be completed or they refer to a general time in the past. The imperfect form is typically used for: habitually repeated actions; time and dates; someone’s age in the past; characteristics; and mental or physical states.

Phrases that Trigger the Imperfect

Lucky for you, there are also a bunch of words and phrases that tend to signal that a verb should be used in the imperfect!

*a menudo* – often

*frecuentemente* – frequently

*rara vez* – rarely

*a veces* – sometimes

*generalmente* – usually

*siempre* – always

*algunas veces* – at times

*mientras* – while

*todos los años* – every year

*cada día* – every day

*muchas veces* – many times

*todo el tiempo* – all the time

*con frecuencia* – frequently

*casi nunca* – almost never

*por lo general* – generally
todos los días – every day

de vez en cuando – once in a while

por un rato – for a while

en aquella época – at that time

**Preterite vs Imperfect Examples**

These past tense forms are often used to talk about an ongoing action or event that was interrupted. Here, the interrupted action uses the imperfect tense, while the interrupting action uses the preterite.

For example:

*Caminaba a la biblioteca cuando me encontré con el amor de mi vida.*

I was walking to the library when I met the love of my life.

*Juana y Alberto hablaban de la reunión cuando llegué a la oficina.*

Juana and Alberto were talking about the meeting when I got to the office.

**Preterite vs Imperfect Statements**

The rule of thumb for determining which tense to use is that the preterite talks about what you did, and the imperfect talks about what you were doing or what you used to do. Notice how the meaning changes for these verbs in the preterite vs the imperfect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preterite</th>
<th>Imperfect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conoci al presidente de la organización.</td>
<td>Conocía al presidente de la organización.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ya supieron del concierto.</td>
<td>Ya sabían del concierto.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella tuvo una carta de su amiga.</td>
<td>Ella tenía una carta de su amiga.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

received a letter from her friend.
Preterite vs Imperfect Exercises

To test your knowledge of when to use the preterite versus the imperfect, fill in the blank(s) by correctly conjugating the verbs in parenthesis.

1. Cuando era niña, ________ (JUGAR) con muñecas.
2. Los chicos ________ (HABLAR) en español.
3. Yo ________ (ESTAR) durmiendo cuando el teléfono ________ (SONAR).
4. Cuando Ana _______ (TENER) tres años, ________ (SER) muy pequeña.
5. Mi hermano nunca me ________ (LLAMAR) antes de las once
6. Ella nunca me ________ (DAR) ningún regalo.
7. Entonces Jessica ________ (EMPEZAR) a tocar la música.
8. Los gemelos ________ (TENER) seis años de edad cuando _______ (NACER) su hermanita.
9. Yo ________ (PINTARSE) el pelo ayer.
10. Don Quijote siempre ________ (HACER) locuras por una dama, que ________ (LLAMARSE) Dulcinea.
Preterite vs Imperfect Grammar Study Activities

Looking for some more ways to study and practice with the past tense in Spanish? Here are a few fun ideas:

- Use storytelling to practice the simple past verb tenses. Tell your teacher or language partner a story and ask them to correct your mistakes. Next, ask them to tell you a story, and pay close attention to their verb tenses.
- Watch your favorite TV shows, videos, or movies with Spanish subtitles turned on. When a character talks about the past, make note of how the preterite versus the imperfect is used in the subtitles.
- Take practice quizzes like this one to continue to solidify your skills!

Don’t Dwell on the Past

Mastering Spanish grammar is tough! Practicing with another person who can give you feedback and constructive criticism is one of the most efficient ways to improve. Homeschool Spanish Academy offers flexible and fun Spanish classes for every level. Our native Spanish-speaking teachers from Guatemala are eager to assist you in communicating about the past, present, and future. Sign up now for a free trial to see how quickly you can gain Spanish fluency.