



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): *corrí, 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): *corría, corrías, corría, corríamos, corrían*

Abrir (to open): *abría, abrías, 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.

Preterite

Conocí al presidente de la organización. I met the president of the organization.

Ya supieron del concierto. They already found out about the concert.

Ella tuvo una carta de su amiga. She received a letter from her friend.

Imperfect

Conocía al presidente de la organización. I knew the president of the organization.

Ya sabían del concierto. They already knew about the concert.

Ella tenía una carta de su amiga. She had a letter from her friend.



Quise encontrar la tienda. I tried to find the store.

Quería encontrar la tienda. I wanted to find the store.

Yo no quise ir al centro comercial. I refused to go to the shopping center.

Yo no quería ir al centro comercial. I didn't want to go to the shopping center.

No pudimos abrir la cuenta. We failed to open the account.

No podíamos abrir la cuenta. We were unable to open the account.

Toqué el piano. I played the piano.

Yo tocaba el piano. I used to play the piano.

Me comí las fresas. I ate the strawberries.

Yo comía las fresas. I was eating strawberries./I used to eat strawberries.

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.