

Using the **Imperfect** Tense and the **Preterite** Tense



When to Use the **Imperfect**

To describe what people, places, and other things were like in the past:

La ciudad **era** vieja y sucia.

La sirenita **se llamaba** Ariel y **tenía** seis hermanas.

When to Use the **Imperfect**

To state the time and people's ages in the past:

Isabel **tenía** ocho años.

Era la una de la mañana.

Eran las nueve y media.

Era noche.

When to Use the Imperfect

To describe actions that were ongoing or in progress in the past:

Rosa **hacía** su tarea *mientras* su hermano **practicaba** fútbol.

Yo **dibujaba** *mientras* que ella **pintaba**.

When to Use the **Imperfect**

To talk about repeated, usual, or habitual actions in the past:

*Los sábados yo **jugaba** con mi vecino.*

*Usualmente él **llegaba** temprano.*

Translating the Imperfect

Often involves "used to",
or "*would" when referring to past habits
(*NOTE:but never when "would" is referring to future possibilities, that's
the conditional "I *would walk* on Sundays if I had more time"):

Yo caminaba los domingos.

I walked on Sundays.

I *would walk on Sundays.

I used to walk on Sundays.

When to Use the **Preterite**

To talk about single, completed actions that took place at specific points in the past:

*El sábado yo **jugué** con mi vecino.*

*Ayer él **llegó** temprano.*

*Ayer **aprendí** una nueva palabra.*

The Imperfect vs. The Preterite

Use **imperfect** with indefinite time frames,
where beginning and end are not specifically known:

Marcos **se sentía** enfermo.

La plaza **estaba** decorada.

Esmeralda **tenía** que regresar.

El tiempo **hacía** frío.

The Imperfect vs. **The Preterite**

Use preterite with specific time frames:

*El lunes él **se sintió** enfermo.*

Estuvo decorada *por dos días.*

Tuvo que regresar *el martes.*

Hizo frío *hace dos días.*

The Imperfect vs. The Preterite

Differences in meaning:

Conocía a Ana. / **Conocí** a Ana.
I used to know her. / I met her.

Podía salir. / **Pude** salir.
I was able to get out the whole time. / Just then, I succeeded in getting out.

Quería hablar. / **Quise** hablar.
I wanted to talk... / I wanted to talk...
Repeatedly: ...I kept wanting to talk. / ONE TIME & COMPLETED =
Extended duration: ...for a while. / I *tried* to talk (implied that I tried but couldn't).

The Imperfect vs. The Preterite

Differences in meaning:

No quería leer. / **No quise leer.**

I didn't want to, over some length of time.

I refused at that moment.

Sabía el razón. / **Supo el razón.**

I always knew the reason.

I suddenly knew the reason. (discovered, realized)

Tenía dinero. / **Tuve dinero.**

I had some money, or I used to have money.

I suddenly had money. (it came to me, I received it then)

The Imperfect vs. The Preterite

The preterite and the imperfect are often used together:

Los perros **dormían** *cuando*
Carlos **entró**.

Cuando **llegaron** a la calle, el
tiempo **hacía** calor.

Practice: **Imperfect** or **Preterite**?

1. As a child Rachel swam a lot.
2. Harold watched TV every Friday.
3. I played basketball yesterday.
4. She played violin every morning.
5. Lola cried when the bell rang.
6. Lola would cry when the bell rang.
7. I fell asleep during the movie.

Practice: What is the correct conjugation?

8. _____ las cuatro de la tarde. (ser)
9. Carlos _____ alto y guapo. (ser)
10. Ayer él _____ en Guatemala. (estar)
11. Siempre me _____ los lunes. (llamar)
12. De repente el teléfono _____. (sonar)
13. Tatiana _____ un accidente. (tener)
14. Yo _____ para las pruebas. (estudiar)