

Preterite and Imperfect: Review

Here are all three regular preterite verb forms together:

HABLAR	COMER	VIVIR
hablé	comí	viví
hablaste	comiste	viviste
habló	comió	vivió
hablamos	comimos	vivimos
hablasteis	comisteis	vivisteis
hablaron	comieron	vivieron

NOTE: The *nosotros* forms for *-ar* and *-ir* verbs are the same in both preterite and present tenses: **hablamos**, **vivimos**.

Here are all three regular imperfect verb forms together:

HABLAR	COMER	VIVIR
hablaba	comía	vivía
hablabas	comías	vivías
hablaba	comía	vivía
hablábamos	comíamos	vivíamos
hablabais	comíais	vivíais
hablaban	comían	vivían

Generally speaking, the preterite is used for actions in the past that are seen as completed, while the imperfect tense is used for past actions that did not have a definite beginning or a definite end.

Juan habló dos horas.

Juan spoke two hours.

(action completed)

Las chicas hablaban en inglés.

The girls used to speak in English.

(no definite beginning or end)

Another way to view this is that the preterite tells us specifically when an action took place, while the imperfect tells us in general when an action took place.

The preterite is used in the following situations:

- For actions that can be viewed as single events
- For actions that were repeated a specific number of times
- For actions that occurred during a specific period of time
- For actions that were part of a chain of events
- To state the beginning or the end of an action

The imperfect is used in the following situations:

- For actions that were repeated habitually
- For actions that "set the stage" for another past action
- For telling time
- For stating one's age
- For mental states (usually)
- For physical sensations (usually)
- To describe the characteristics of people, things or conditions

Ser, ir, dar and hacer are irregular in the preterite:

SER	IR
fui	fui
fuiste	fuiste
fue	fue
fuimos	fuimos
fuisteis	fuisteis
fueron	fueron

DAR	HACER
di	hice
diste	hiciste
dio	hizo
dimos	hicimos
disteis	hicisteis
dieron	hicieron

NOTE: *This is not a typo; ser and ir do have identical conjugations in the preterite!*

There are only three irregular verbs in the imperfect:

SER	IR	VER
era	iba	veía
eras	ibas	veías
era	iba	veía
éramos	íbamos	veíamos
erais	ibais	veíais
eran	iban	veían

Some words and phrases indicate specific time frames, and therefore signal the use of the preterite.

- ayer** (yesterday)
- anteayer** (the day before yesterday)
- anoche** (last night)
- desde el primer momento** (from the first moment)
- durante dos siglos** (for two centuries)
- el otro día** (the other day)
- en ese momento** (at that moment)

entonces (then)
esta mañana (this morning)
esta tarde (this afternoon)
la semana pasada (last week)
el mes pasado (last month)
el año pasado (last year)
hace dos días, años (two days, years ago)
ayer por la mañana (yesterday morning)
ayer por la tarde (yesterday afternoon)

Other words and phrases indicate repetitive, vague or non-specific time frames, and therefore signal the use of the imperfect.

a menudo (often)
a veces (sometimes)
cada día (every day)
cada semana (every week)
cada mes (every month)
cada año (every year)
con frecuencia (frequently)
de vez en cuando (from time to time)
en aquella época (at that time)
frecuentemente (frequently)
generalmente (usually)
muchas veces (many times)
mucho (a lot)
nunca (never)
por un rato (for awhile)
siempre (always)
tantas veces (so many times)
todas las semanas (every week)
todos los días (every day)
todo el tiempo (all the time)
varias veces (several times)

-ar and -er verbs that change their stem in the present tense do not change in the preterite. They are conjugated just like other regular preterite verbs.

PRESENT	PRETERITE
cerrar	cerrar
cierro	cerré
cierras	cerraste
cierra	cerró
cerramos	cerramos
cerráis	cerrasteis
cierran	cerraron

-ir verbs that change their stem in the present tense do change in the preterite, but in a different way. They change e:i and o:u in the third person, singular and plural.

PRESENT	PRETERITE
preferir	preferir
prefiero	preferí
prefieres	preferiste
prefiere	prefirió
preferimos	preferimos
preferís	preferisteis
prefieren	prefirieron

PRESENT	PRETERITE
dormir	dormir
duermo	dormí
duermes	dormiste
duerme	durmió
dormimos	dormimos
dormís	dormisteis
duermen	durmieron

There are a number of orthographic changing verbs in the preterite:

Verbs that end in -gar change g to gu

Verbs that end in -car change c to qu

Verbs that end in -zar change z to c

Verbs that end in -aer, -eer, -oír, -oer, and uir change ío to yó and ieron to yeron

Here are three more verbs that are irregular in the preterite:

DECIR	TRAER	VER
dije	traje	vi
dijiste	trajiste	viste
dijo	trajo	vio
dijimos	trajimos	vimos
dijisteis	trajisteis	visteis
dijeron	trajeron	vieron

Verbs that end in -ucir are irregular and conjugated as follows:

producir

produce

produjiste

produjo

produjimos

produjisteis

produjeron

There are a number of verbs that are irregular in the preterite that follow a particular pattern. The pattern is that while their stems change, they all take the following endings:

- e
- iste
- o
- imos
- isteis
- ieron

Here are the verbs, along with their corresponding stem changes:

INFINITIVE	STEM CHANGE
andar	anduv-
estar	estuv-
tener	tuv-
caber	cup-
haber	hub-
poder	pud-
poner	pus-
saber	sup-
hacer	hic-
querer	quis-
venir	vin-

Exception: hacer (el/ella/usted hizo)

Some verbs actually change meaning, depending upon whether they are used in the preterite or the imperfect. This is not surprising, since the difference in meaning can be traced back to the different way in which these two past tenses are used.

conocer

Conocí a Juan hace cinco años.

I **met** Juan five years ago.
(completed action)

En aquella época **conocíamos** muy bien la ciudad.

At that time we **knew** the city very well.
(no definite beginning or end)

querer

María **quiso** comprar la casa.

María **tried** to buy the house.
(completed action)

Juan **quería** comprar la casa.

Juan **wanted** to buy the house.
(no definite beginning or end)

no querer

María **no quiso** comprar la casa.

Maria **refused** to buy the house.
(completed action)

Juan **no quería** comprar la casa.

Juan **did not want** to buy the house.
(no definite beginning or end)

saber

María lo **supo** ayer.

Maria **found out** yesterday.
(completed action)

Juan **sabía** que María venía.

Juan **knew** that Maria was coming.
(no definite beginning or end)

poder

María **pudo** levantar la mesa.

Maria **succeeded** in lifting the table.
(completed action)

Juan **podía** participar en la manifestación.

Juan **was able** to participate in the demonstration.
(no definite beginning or end)

tener

María **tuvo** una carta de su mamá.

Maria **received** a letter from her mom.
(completed action)

Juan **tenía** un coche nuevo.

Juan **used to have** a new car.
(no definite beginning or end)