

Preterit vs. Imperfect

Using the preterite and the imperfect together.

Look back at the definitions of these two tenses. You can think of the **preterite** being used for actions occurring at one moment in time. The **imperfect** is used for actions, situations or descriptions occupying an undefined period of time – whose beginning and ending is unknown.

Preterite	Imperfect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Completed (started <u>and</u> finished over a <u>short</u> period of time) ■ single events ■ single actions ■ series of actions or events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Repeated or habitual actions (would, used to, always..) ■ Background information & descriptions (over a longer period of time) ■ Interrupted/unfinished actions

THE PRETERITE

The preterite describes **what happened**. The speaker is trying to communicate to his/her listener that these events began and/or ended in the past.

I. A single instantaneous event or action

Cerré la puerta.
*Empecé a llorar.

I closed the door.
I began to cry

* While the activity may be continuous after it begins, the moment it begins is an instantaneous event.

II. An activity or state of limited duration

Leímos el libro por veinte minutos
Asistió a la universidad desde 1986 hasta 1990

We read the book for 20 minutes
She attended the university from 1986 until 1990

III. An action repeated a specific number of times

Me llamó cinco veces
Este hombre ganó las elecciones en 1992 y en 1996

He called me five times
This man won the election in 1992 and 1996

IV. A series of completed events (each one completed before the next begins)

Me levanté, me duché, comí una manzana y salí para clase

I got up, took a shower, ate an apple and left for class

V. A reaction showing a beginning/ end of a state or activity (marking the beginning/end point)

Cuando los vi, me puse triste
 De repente, supe la verdad
 Cuando me dijeron eso, me enojé

*When I saw them, I became sad
 Suddenly, I found out the truth
 When they told me that, I got angry*

THE IMPERFECT

The imperfect describes what something/someone **was like** and what **was happening**. The speaker is trying to communicate the existing conditions when something took place in the past.

I. To describe states of being or an ongoing activity

*Eran las cinco de la tarde	<i>It was five p.m</i>
Hacía muchísimo frío.	<i>It was very cold</i>
*Tenía dieciséis años.	<i>She was sixteen</i>
Leía una revista cuando sonó el teléfono	<i>I was reading a magazine when the telephone rang</i>

*You can measure time, but it is not constantly beginning and ending –it is continuous. Therefore, the imperfect is used with expressions of time and age.

II. Habitual or repeated action (often expressed in English by used to)

No me gustaban las películas de horror	<i>I didn't use to like horror movies</i>
Visitaba a mis parientes todos los veranos	<i>I visited my relatives every summer.</i>

SIEMPRE AND NUNCA WITH THE PRETERITE/IMPERFECT

While one may think that siempre/nunca would be used almost exclusively with the imperfect, just the opposite is true. Siempre and nunca are almost always used with the preterite, the only exception being siempre when the verb of the sentence/clause has a habitual meaning.

Nunca me gustó el hígado con cebolla.	<i>I never liked liver and onions.</i>
Siempre tuve muchos amigos.	<i>I always had a lot of friends</i>
Siempre jugaba con mis amigos después de la escuela	<i>I always played with my friends after school</i>

SPECIAL CASES:

These verbs are special for a variety of reasons. First, several of them have alternative English translations in the preterite. Second, some of them reflect a change in a state rather than simply describing the state.

Preterite	Imperfect
no pudo: tried but failed// pudo: succeeded	podía: could// no podía: was unable to
no quiso: refused// quiso: tried to (attempted to)	quería: wanted, intended
supo: found out (a fact)	sabía: knew (a fact)
conoció: met (a person)	conocía: knew (a person)
hubo: there was (occurred)	había: there were (existed)
tuve (miedo): to become (scared)	tenía: used to have (possession)
tuve que: obligated to do something	tenía que: was supposed to do something