

El pretérito y el imperfecto

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

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)

let's set a scene with the imperfect:

Eran las nueve de la noche. Era viernes. Hacía mal tiempo. Llovía. Todos estábamos en casa. Mamá y Papá miraban la televisión; yo leía una novela de StarTrek; mi hermana hablaba por teléfono con su novio en su cuarto. Esnupi (nuestro perro) dormía detrás del sillón en la sala.

It was 9:00 at night. It was Friday. It was bad weather. It was raining. We were all at home. Mom and Dad were watching television; I was reading a StarTrek novel; my sister was talking on the phone with her boyfriend in her room. Esnupi (our dog) was sleeping behind the armchair in the living room.
This has all been written in the Imperfect.

let's get to the action with the preterite:

De repente, ¡Entró un ladrón! Pasó por la escalera y caminó hasta el dormitorio de mis padres. Miró en el cuarto cuando oyó la voz de mi hermana. Se volvió y bajó las escaleras. Trató de huir de la casa, pero Esnupi se despertó y mordió la pierna del ladrón.

Suddenly, a robber entered! He went upstairs and walked down to my parent's bedroom. He looked in the room but then he heard my sister's voice. He turned and went down the stairs. He tried to flee the house, but Esnupi woke up and bit the robber's leg.

This is a series of actions in the Preterite which happened within the setting established by the Imperfect.