

Spanish: Preterite & Imperfect

EL PRETÉRITO

When is the preterite tense generally used?

-Generally used for actions in the past that are seen as completed

-Implies that the past action had a definite beginning and definite end:

Juan habló desde la una hasta las dos.

Juan talked from one until two o'clock.

-Keep in mind that the beginning and end may not be clearly stated:

Juan habló dos horas.

Juan talked for two hours.

Trabajé en el laboratorio por 8 años.

I worked at the hospital for 8 years.

-To state the beginning or the end of an action in the past:

Empezó a llover a las nueve.

It started to rain at nine o'clock.

Terminamos la tarea muy tarde anoche.

We finished the homework very late last night.

-For actions that were a part of a chain of events:

Entregué el examen, salí de la clase y conduje a mi casa.

I turned in the exam, left (from) the classroom, and drove home.

-For actions that occurred during a specific period of time:

Juan vivió en Madrid desde 2001 hasta 2007.

Juan lived in Madrid from 2001 until 2007.

-For actions that were repeated a specific number of times:

Mi hermana me llamó ocho veces ayer.

My sister called me eight times yesterday.

Fui a México 3 veces este año.

I went to México 3 times this year.

EL IMPERFECTO

When is the imperfect tense generally used?

-Actions in the past that are not seen as completed.

-implies that the past action did not have a definite beginning or definite end:

Las chicas hablaban en inglés.

The girls used to speak/were speaking/would speak in English.

-For past actions that were repeated habitually:

Me cepillaba los dientes todas las noches.
I brushed/used to brush/ would brush my teeth every night.

-For actions that provide background information for another event

Hablábamos cuando la profesora entró en la clase.
We were talking when the professor entered the classroom.

(Yo) preparaba la cena cuándo sonó el teléfono.
I was cooking (preparing) dinner when the phone rang.

-For ****telling time**** in the past:

Eran las tres y media de la tarde.
It was 3:30 p.m.

-For ****stating one's age**** in the past:

Tenía doce años aquel verano.
I was twelve years old that summer.

-To give a description in the past:

Mi abuela era simpática, cariñosa y graciosa.
My grandmother was kind, affectionate, and funny.

La ciudad era preciosa y estaba situada al lado del mar.
The city was beautiful and was situated near the sea.

Verbs: There are some verbs in Spanish that change meaning when used in the preterite compared to when they are used in the imperfect.

Conocer – to know

En aquella época **conocíamos** muy bien la ciudad.
Back then, we knew the city very well. (no definite beginning or end)

Conocí a Juan hace cinco años.
I met Juan five years ago. (completed action)

Querer – to want

Juan **quería** comprar la casa.
Juan wanted to buy the house. (no definite beginning or end)

María **quiso** comprar la casa.
Maria tried to buy the house. (completed action)

No querer – to not want

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

María **no quiso** comprar la casa.
Maria refused to buy the house. (completed action)

Saber – to know

María lo **supo** ayer.

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

Juan **sabía** que María venía a visitarlo.

*Juan **knew** that María was coming to visit him. (no definite beginning or end)*

Poder – to be able to

Juan **podía** correr cinco kilómetros.

*Juan **was able** to run five kilometers. (no definite beginning or end)*

María **pudo** levantar la mesa.

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

Tener – to have

Juan **tenía** una casa en la playa.

*Juan **used to have** a house at the beach. (no definite beginning or end)*

María **tuvo** una carta de su mamá.

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

Words/Phrases that typically signal the use of the Preterite: There are many words/phrases in Spanish that increase the likelihood of the use of the preterite tense because such words/phrases indicate specific time frames:

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)

Words/Phrases that typically signal the use of Imperfect: There are other words/phrases in Spanish that increase the likelihood of the use of the imperfect tense because such words/phrases indicate repetitive, non-specific time frames:

a menudo (often) / **a veces** (sometimes)

cada día/semana (every day/week)

cada mes/año (every/year)

con frecuencia (frequently)

de vez en cuando (from time to time)

en aquella época (at that time/back then)

frecuentemente (frequently)

generalmente (usually)

muchas veces (many times)

nunca/siempre (never/always)

todas las semanas (every week)

todos los días (every day)

todo el tiempo (all the time)

**** These are the only hard and fast rules for the Imperfect tense and cannot be expressed in the preterite****