

Imperfect Past Tense in Spanish

In contrast to the preterite tense, which focuses on the *event* (the basics of what actually happened), the imperfect past tense is used to describe the details, background information or other elements not key to the main action. The examples below show imperfect sentences contrasted with preterite sentences:

Preterite:

I bought the car.

We went to the store.

I visited my grandparents.

She sent me a letter.

Imperfect:

The car was fast and red. (focuses on description or details rather than a specific event)

The store was next to the park. (focuses on the location instead of a specific action)

My grandparents were feeling ill. (We don't know when they started feeling ill and it isn't the purpose of the sentence to convey that information)

I used to write letters when I was young. (Focuses on an habitual action that frequently occurred earlier but has no relevance to a specific current event)

The difference between the preterite and imperfect tenses is not always black and white. One must understand the aspect that the speaker is trying to create (that of an ongoing, descriptive or habitual feel or that of a completed event). However, the following situations *usually* trigger the use of the imperfect:

- Description in the past (including the big-9: date, time, weather, age, location, physical appearance, physical condition, emotional state, attitudes/desires)
- An ongoing action or an action in progress (in English, we use the construction "was/were + -ing" (He was studying) to portray this.
- Background information (what actions were going on already before an event interrupts (They were watching (imperfect) television **when** the telephone rang (preterite).
- habitual or repeated actions without noting when they specifically occurred and without relevance to the present. (We often swam when we were younger.) Look for ideas such as "used to", "often", "always", "frequently", etc.

Formation of the Imperfect tense in Spanish

-ar verb endings-

aba	-ábamos
-abas	-abais
-aba	-aban

hablar: yo hablaba, tú hablabas, él/ella/usted hablaba, nosotros hablábamos, vosotros hablabais, ellos/ellas/ustedes hablaban

-er/-ir verb endings

-ía	-íamos
-ías	-íais
-ía	-ían

comer: yo comía, tú comías, él/ella/usted comía, nosotros comíamos, vosotros comíais, ellos/ellas/ustedes comían

To practice this concept, please visit:

<http://www.conjugemos.com> (#11)

<http://www.studyspanish.com/tutorial.htm> (62-74)

http://www.colby.edu/~bknelson/exercises/pre_imp.html

<http://www.spaleon.com/imp.php>

Irregular imperfect verbs (note: only three in the entire language!)

ser

era	éramos
eras	erais
era	eran

ir

iba	íbamos
ibas	ibais
iba	iban

ver

veía	veíamos
veías	veíais
veía	veían