

The Imperfect VS The Preterit

When to use which tense:

Unlike English, Spanish has two simple past tenses, known as the **preterit** and the **imperfect** both of which are used to talk about something that has already taken place.

We've already learned that to talk about things that have happened in the past, we use the **preterit** form of a verb in Spanish. The other tense is the **imperfect**. They BOTH are used to express events in the past (that have already happened).

So what's the difference? In general, the preterit is used *when speaking of a completed action*, that is, when the verb refers to an action that *has a clear end*. On the other hand, the other past tense is known as an imperfect tense because "imperfect" can also mean "*incomplete*"; the imperfect is used *to refer to an action that doesn't have a specific ending*. Following are some more specific uses that should clarify the difference.

THE IMPERFECT: In grammatical terms, the word "perfect" means completed. The prefix *im*— means "not," so imperfect means not completed. Thus, the imperfect tense is generally used in situations where the completion of the verb is not certain, or at least not the point of the sentence. The acronym WATERS will help you remember that the imperfect is generally used to express ongoing situations that sort of "flow" on and have no specific place in time. Each word that represents a letter in WATERS indicates a situation when an imperfect verb will be used. Remember that in the following examples, verbs in the imperfect are underlined.

- **Weather**
 - Llovía. → It was raining.
- **Age**
 - *Cuando tenía tres años, quería ser bombera.* → When I was three, I wanted to be a firefighter.
- **Time**
 - *Eran las cuatro.* → It was four o'clock.
- **Emotion**
 - *Estaba cansada.* → I was tired.
- **Repetition**
 - *Yo visitaba a mi abuela de vez en cuando.* → I used to visit my grandmother from time to time.
- **Setting or description**
 - *El sol brillaba y la vista era bonita.* → The sun was shining and the view was pretty.

Since the English language doesn't have a special tense to indicate repetitive or ongoing actions, there are a number of ways to get across this idea. The expression "used to ..." in front of a verb, or even using the word "would" in front of the verb can indicate repetitive actions. For example: "I used to study a lot" or "I would cry every day in kindergarten." To show ongoing actions in English, the past progressive tense is often used: "I was studying ..." Don't try to translate these expressions literally into Spanish, just use the imperfect conjugation of the verb.

THE PRETERIT: There are certain situations in the past that will be stated using the preterit tense. Usually preterit situations have something to do with completed actions that can be placed at a specific point in time. The preterit tends to “freeze” an action or state in past time or to view it as over and done with. The acronym **SAFE** will help you remember the types of situations in the past that require you to use the preterit tense. In the English examples below, the verbs in bold print would be conjugated in the preterit in Spanish because of the way they are used in the sentence.

Use the preterit tense of the verb when the sentence indicates:

- Specific instance or number of instances
 - *Le **llamó** tres veces. El me **llamó** ayer*
 - He **called** him **three** times. He **called** me **yesterday**.
- Action that interrupts ongoing events
 - *Ella **llamó** mientras yo *trabajaba*.*
 - She **called** while I was working.
- Focus on beginning or ending of action
 - ***Llovió** a las seis y media en punto.*
 - It **rained** at exactly 6:30.
- Enclosed amount of time (line segment)
 - *Los árabes **controlaron** mucho de España por más que 700 años.*
 - The Arabs **controlled** much of Spain for over 700 years.

Re-write the Acronyms for Each Tense

When to Use the Imperfect:

W _____

A _____

T _____

E _____

R _____

S _____

When to Use the Preterit:

S _____

A _____

F _____

E _____