

# Preterite vs Imperfect

Trying to decide when to use the Preterite and when to use the Imperfect is one of the challenges of learning these two tenses. Review the uses of the **Imperfect** and the **Preterite**, and make a chart for yourself listing the differences.

- o We generalize and say that the Imperfect is used to describe a scene and the Preterite is used to list series of completed actions. It can be a little more complex, especially with verbs that change meaning depending on the tense.
- o Use the Imperfect
  - When you "set a scene" describing what your house or dog used to look like and what your family was like,
  - When you are describing what people were doing or used to do
  - or when you describe what it was like when you arrived at the party last night.
- o The *stories* that occur within these settings happen in the Preterite!

For example, let's set a scene:

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**.**

But now let's talk about the action:

De repente, ¡Entró un ladrón! Pasó por la escalera y caminó hasta la recámara 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.
- The focus of the Preterite is on completed action(s). The Imperfect focuses on a state of being.

Let's look at some examples:

Comí la cena...

I ate my dinner (and I finished it)

Comía la cena...	I was eating my dinner...[when something happened] -or- I used to eat my dinner...
Tuvo que devolver la camisa	She had to -and did- return the shirt.
Tenía que devolver la camisa	She had to return the shirt (She was supposed to return it - but we don't know if she did or not.)

**Some verbs have different meanings in the Imperfect and Preterite forms:**

	Imperfect	Preterite
Conocer	to have known someone	to have met someone
Saber	to have known something	to have found out something
Querer	wanted	tried
No Querer	didn't want	refused
Poder	was able to (capable of)	managed to (succeeded)
No Poder	wasn't able to (not capable)	failed to

**Examples:**

Quise hacerlo pero no pude.	I tried to do it but I failed (to do it)
Quería ir a la playa cada fin de semana. Y por no trabajar los fines de semana, podía ir frecuentemente.	I wanted to go to the beach every weekend. And because I didn't work weekends, I was able to go frequently.
La conocí el año pasado.	I met her last year.
Nos conocíamos por tres meses antes de casarnos.	We knew each other for three months before marrying.