**The preterite is used:**

**To tell of something that happened once** — *Fuimos ayer a la playa.* (We went to the beach yesterday.)*Escribí la carta.*(I wrote the letter.)

**To tell of something that happened more than once but with a specific end** — *Fui ayer a la tienda seis veces.* (I went to the store six times yesterday.) *Leyó el libro cinco veces.* (He read the book five times.)

**To indicate the beginning or end of a process** — *Tuvo frío.*(He got cold.) *El huracán se terminó a las ocho.*(The hurricane was over at 8.)

**The imperfect indicative is used:**

**To tell of past habitual or repeated actions** — *Iba a la tienda.*(I used to go to the store.) *Leíamos los libros.* (We would read the books.)*Lavaban las manos.* (They would wash their hands.) *Escribía muchas cartas.* (I wrote many letters.)

**To describe a condition, mental state or state of being from the past —***Había una casa aquí.* (There used to be a house here.) *Era estúpido.*(He was stupid.) *No te conocía.*(I didn't know you.) *Quería estar feliz.*(He wanted to be happy.) *Tenía frío.* (He was cold.)

**To describe an action that occurred over an unspecified time**— Lavaban los manos. (They were washing their hands.) Cuando José tocaba el piano, María comía. (While José was playing the piano, María was eating.)

**To indicate time or age in the past**— Era la una de la tarde. (It was 1 p.m.)Tenía 43 años.(She was 43 years old.)

### Other distinctions:

**Background** — The imperfect indicative is frequently used to provide the background for an event that is described using the preterite.Era[imperfect]la una de la tarde cuando comió[preterite]. (It was 1 p.m. when she ate.) Yo escribía[imperfect]cuando llegaste[preterite]. (I was writing when you arrived.)

**Differences in translated meaning** — Because of the way the two tenses are used, some verbs can be translated using differing words in English depending on the tense in Spanish. This is especially true when the preterite is used to indicate the beginning or end of a process.Conocí al presidente. (I met the president.)Conocía al presidente. (I knew the president.) Tuvo frío. (He got cold.)Tenía frío.(He was cold.)Supe escuchar. (I found out how to listen.) Sabía escuchar.(I knew how to listen.)

### Final note:

Some of the sentences on this page could be stated in the other tense with a change of meaning. For example, while "escribía muchas cartas" would be the typical way of saying "I wrote many letters," as that is something that typically would take place over an unspecified period of time, one also might say "escribí muchas cartas." But the meaning of the sentence, not readily translatable without a context to English, would change to indicate that the speaker was referring to a specific point in time. For example, if you were talking about writing many letters while you were on a particular trip, you might use the preterite form.

**Preterit vs. imperfect**

The preterit and imperfect are both simple (i.e., non-compound or one-word) tenses indicating a past-time action or state. Sometimes a given English past-tense sentence may be translated into Spanish with either the preterit or the imperfect, but these two tenses have different meanings or implications.

The **imperfect** tense may be considered the present tense backshifted into past time. It is generally used to indicate:

1. A past action or state being viewed as in progress. In English we often use the past progressive for this: “was/were ...-ing”.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Mirábamos las mariposas.** |  | *We were watching the butterflies.* |
|  | | |
| **Mientras ella abría la** **puerta...** |  | *As she opened (was opening) the door...* |

1. Two frequent examples of states in past time which are normally viewed as in progress and thus given in the imperfect:
   1. Descriptions in past time, that is, what a person, thing, or situation was like. This also includes situations such as giving the time of day, the date, the weather, one's age, etc. (unless a change or the start/end of a state is indicated, in which case the preterit is normally used).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Mi madre era muy baja, tenía** **40 años, y trabajaba sin fin.** |  | *My mother was very short, was 40 years old, and worked constantly.* |
|  | | |
| **Eran las diez de la noche,** **había una tormenta terrible,** **y teníamos miedo.** |  | *It was 10:00 at night, there was a terrible storm out, and we were afraid.* |

* 1. Mental states (in progress) in past time.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **No lo sabía.** |  | *I didn't know it/that.* |
|  | | |
| **Creíamos que estábamos perdidos.** |  | *We thought we were lost.* |

1. A past action viewed as being customary or habitual. Note that English often uses “would” or “used to” to indicate this.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **En México, yo caminaba por la playa y las gaviotas** **hacían circulos sin** **terminar en el cielo.** |  | *In Mexico, I used to walk along the beach and the seagulls would make endless circles in the sky.* |

\* \* \* \*

The **preterit** tends to “freeze” an action or state in past time, or to view it as over and done with. It is used to:

1. Present an action or state in past time as completed or as something instantaneous. Note that expressions of time which limit the action to a more or less specific period of time —even a long period such as thousands of years— generally indicate that the action is being viewed as completed and suggest the preterit.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **¿Quién rompió el juguete?** |  | *Who broke the toy?* |
|  | | |
| **Elena bailó toda la noche.** |  | *Elena danced all night.* |
|  | | |
| **Los Gómez vivieron allí seis años.** |  | *Mr. and Mrs. Gómez lived there six years.* |

1. Give a series of sequential actions in past time, that is, “first this happened, then something else occurred, and then...”

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Vine, vi, vencí.** |  | *I came, I saw, I conquered.* |
|  | | |
| **Trabajó un poco, fue a** **McDonalds a comer, y luego** **volvió a casa.** |  | *She worked a bit, went to McDonalds to eat, and then returned home.* |

1. Show the start or finish of an action or state, or indicate a change in a state in past time.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Se puso enojado.** |  | *He got (became) angry.* |
|  | | |
| **El cielo se anubló.** |  | *The sky clouded up.* |

1. Note, however, that it is possible to view start-up and ending actions as in progress, in which case the imperfect would be used [**Se ponía enojado.** *He was getting angry.* / **El cielo se anublaba.** *The sky was clouding  up.*].
2. Indicate an action as interrupting a previously existing action or stated (usually given in the imperfect).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Mientras los demás dormían**, **María se escapó.** |  | *While the rest were sleeping, María escaped.* |

### Overview

### Many students have trouble knowing when to use the preterit past or the imperfect past since they both refer to actions in the past. There are several general rules to follow as well as phrases to look out for. Many phrases use only one tense or the other, so memorizing them is very helpful in figuring out whether the following verb will be in the preterit or imperfect.

### General Preterit Uses

Generally, the preterit is used for actions considered completed, actions that have definite beginning and end points. These can be actions that can be viewed as single events, actions that were part of a chain of events, actions that were repeated a very specific number of times, or actions that specifically state the beginning and end of an action.

* **Fui** al baile anoche. (I went to the dance last night.)
* **Caminé**al mercado, compré unos plátanos, y regresé a casa. (I walked to the market, bought some bananas, and returned home.)
* Te **llamó**tres veces. (He called you three times.)
* **Hablé**con mi madre de las dos hasta las tres. (I spoke with my mother from two o’clock until three o’clock.)

#### Useful Phrases that Trigger the Preterit

Some words and phrases are very helpful in indicating specific time frames and therefore signal the use of the preterit.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **a esa hora** | at that time | **ayer por la tarde** | yesterday afternoon | **en ese momento** | at that moment |
| **anoche** | last night | **ayer por la noche** | last night | **hace (dos) años/días** | (two) years/days ago |
| **ante anoche** | the night before last | **el año pasado** | last year | **hoy por la mañana** | this morning |
| **ante ayer** | the day before yesterday | **el (lunes) pasado** | last (Monday) | **la semana pasada** | last week |
| **ayer al mediodía** | yesterday at noon | **el mes pasado** | last month | **una vez** | one time |
| **ayer por la mañana** | yesterday morning | **el otro día** | the other day | **durante (tres) siglos** | for (three) centuries |
| **ayer** | yesterday | **entonces** | then | **la semana pasada** | last week |
| **desde el primer momento** | from the first moment | **esta mañana** | this morning | **esta tarde** | this afternoon |

#### Verbs that are Preterit by Nature

Some verbs are preterit by nature since they have a very definite beginning and ending.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **casarse** | to get married | **graduarse** | to graduate |
| **cumplir años** | to turn a certain age | **llegar** | to arrive |
| **darse cuenta de** | to realize | **morir** | to die |
| **decidir** | to decide | **nacer** | to be born |
| **descubrir** | to discover | **salir** | to leave |

### General Imperfect Uses

Generally used for actions in the past that do not have a definite end. These can be actions that are not yet completed or refer to a time in general in the past. They can be actions that were repeated habitually, actions that set the stage for another past tense event, for time and dates in the past, for telling a person’s age in the past, to describe people (characteristics) in the past, and to communicate mental or physical states in the past. For descriptions, think of describing what people used to be like in a photograph.

* Cuando **era** niña, **jugaba** con muñecas. (When I was a child, I played with dolls.)
* Los chicos **hablaban**en español. (The boys used to speak in Spanish.)
* **Estaba**durmiendo cuando el teléfono sonó. (I was sleeping when the telephone rang.)
* Cuando **tenía**tres años, **era** muy pequeño. (When he was three years old, he was very small.)

#### Useful Phrases that Trigger the Imperfect

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **a menudo** | often | **frecuentemente** | frequently | **rara vez** | rarely |
| **a veces** | sometimes | **generalmente** | usually | **siempre** | always |
| **algunas veces** | at times | **mientras** | while | **tantas veces** | so many times |
| **cada día/semana/mes/año** | every day/week/month/year | **muchas veces** | many times | **todas las semanas** | every week |
| **con frecuencia** | frequently | **mucho** **nunca** | a lot never | **todos los años** | every year |
| **casi nunca** | almost never | **por lo general** | generally | **todos los días** | everyday |
| **de vez en cuando** | once in a while | **por un rato** | for a while | **todo el tiempo** | all the time |
| **en aquella época** | at that time | **varias veces** | several times |  |  |