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Caminé al mercado, compré unos plátanos, y regresé a casa. I walked to the market, bought some bananas, and returned home.

The imperfect tense (*pretérito imperfecto*) and the preterite tense (*pretérito indefinido*) are both Spanish past tenses with different functions. The imperfect refers to an action or state that was ongoing, repeated or in progress at a specific moment in the past. The preterite expresses one-off actions and sequential events in the past. Learn the difference between the imperfect and preterite tenses in Spanish grammar with Lingolia's tense comparison, then put your knowledge to the test in the interactive exercises. Conjugate the imperfect tense by removing the infinitive endings (-ar/-er/-ir) and adding the following endings to the stem: Note that the endings for -er and -ir verbs are the same. Check out our page dedicated to the Spanish imperfect to learn about this tense's conjugation in detail. To conjugate the preterite tense in Spanish grammar, we remove the infinitive endings (-ar/-ir/-er) and add the following endings to the stem: Note that the endings for -er and -ir verbs are the same. Go to our page all about the preterite tense in Spanish grammar to learn more about its conjugation. As the imperfect and the preterite are both past tenses, it's not always clear when to use which one. In addition to the specific signal words that trigger each tense (see below), a rough comparison to English past tenses can also be helpful: the imperfect is comparable to the past progressive in English (was doing, was going, was talking ...) the preterite is comparable to the simple past in English (did, went, talked ...)

Take a look at the example sentence below: Example: Yo dormía placidamente en el sofá cuando mi gato saltó de pronto sobre la estantería. I was sleeping soundly on the sofa when my cat suddenly jumped onto the bookshelf. The imperfect tense describes the ongoing action, while the preterite tense describes the completed action. The preterite tense expresses one-off actions, they are a good starting point to understand how the imperfect tense expresses an ongoing action. Example: Yo dormía placidamente en el sofá cuando mi gato saltó de pronto sobre la estantería. I was sleeping soundly on the sofa when my cat suddenly jumped onto the bookshelf. The imperfect tense describes the ongoing action, while the preterite tense expresses one-off actions. The preterite tense expresses one-off actions that were already in progress when another action (expressed in the preterite) occurred. Example: Yo dormía placidamente en el sofá cuando mi gato saltó de pronto sobre la estantería. I was sleeping soundly on the sofa when my cat suddenly jumped onto the bookshelf. A repeated past action or habit with no clear start and end (= used to) Example: Mi abuela ponía flores nuevas cada domingo en este jarrón. My grandma used to put fresh flowers in this vase every Sunday, the circumstances or feelings related to a situation in the past. Example: Yo estaba muy preocupada porque sabía que era su jarrón favorito. I was really worried because I knew it was her favourite vase. The preterite tense expresses: one-off past actions Example: Ayer se rompió el jarrón favorito de mi abuela Margarita.Yesterday my grandma Margarita's favourite vase broke. a sequence of past actions Example: Sin pensarlo, busqué la escoba, recogí todos los trozos y lo tiré a la basura.Without thinking, I reached for the broom, collected all the pieces and threw them in the bin. actions that occurred in the middle of another action that was already in progress (expressed in the imperfect) Example: Yo dormía placidamente en el sofá cuando mi gato saltó de pronto sobre la estantería y empujó el jarrón con la cola.I was sleeping soundly on the sofa when my cat suddenly jumped onto the bookshelf and broke the vase with his tail. Signal words can help us choose between similar tenses like the imperfect and the preterite: Signal words for the imperfect: siemprealways todos los... (días, sábados)every... (day, Saturday, etc.) cuando era /when I was young cada vez que...every time/whenever mientraswhile poco a pocostep by step Signal words for the preterite: ayer/yesterday el año pasadolast year la semana pasada last week el fin de semana the weekend the verb + haber + participle to express the perfect tense. The imperfect and the preterite have different meanings depending on whether they appear in the present or the imperfect. When you see the imperfect verb in the present, it means that the action was ongoing where you can practise according to your level. Check your understanding by hovering over the info bubbles for simple explanations and handy tips. Imperfecto or Preterite – free exercise Preterito imperfecto vs. Pretérito indefinido – terminación en -ar (cantar) A2 Pretérito imperfecto vs. Pretérito indefinido – terminación en -er (volver) A2 Pretérito imperfecto vs. Pretérito indefinido – terminación en -ir (escribir) A2 Pretérito imperfecto vs. Pretérito indefinido – conjugación verbos regulares (1) A2 Pretérito imperfecto vs. Pretérito indefinido – conjugación verbos irregulares (1) A2 Pretérito imperfecto vs. Pretérito indefinido – acciones simultáneas y sucesivas (verbos regulares) B1 Pretérito imperfecto vs. Pretérito indefinido – acciones simultáneas y sucesivas (verbos regulares e irregulares 1) B1 Pretérito imperfecto vs. Pretérito indefinido – acciones puntuales y recurrentes (verbos regulares e irregulares 2) B1 Pretérito imperfecto vs. Pretérito indefinido – acciones en curso/puntuales (verbos regulares) B1 Pretérito imperfecto vs. Pretérito indefinido – acciones en curso/puntuales (verbos regulares e irregulares 1) 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Tricks for Learning Spanish Let's explore some tips for Spanish learners. Change Your TV Habits Consider switching things up a little and watchice Spanish TV or movies. Put English subtitles on and it will help you associate specific words and phrases with the sound of spoken Spanish. Español. Likewise, you could put on your own favorite films and TV shows... but watch them with Spanish subtitles. Through this method, you will pick up particular verbs and phrases that catch your eye. Practice With Friends Whether they're online acquaintances on Duolingo or real-life friends that you can converse with, the best (and fastest!) way to become fluent in any language is simply to speak it. Particularly if the speaker can offer you feedback. If you have any Spanish-speaking friends, now's the time to ask for their help! If you're a bit shy about speaking right now, you could ask them to text or email you in Spanish instead, which would give you a chance to practice your written communication too. Apps, Games, Quizzes If you struggle to settle down and "study" because it feels too much like hard work, try making things fun! There are hundreds of Youtube videos, smartphone apps, and online tutorials that can help train your brain gradually, over time. Gamified language-learning apps, social media groups, and language forums are great places to start. TikTok is a great tool for learning Spanish grammar and language. All of these tips can be incorporated into your daily routine. Keeping up with your Spanish practice regularly, even just for a few minutes a day, will solidify and consolidate the information you are learning. Indeed, this will push it into your long-term memory. FAQs About the Imperfect and Preterite Tenses in Spanish Now, here are some questions that might be of help What does "ayer por la tarde" and "en aquella época" mean in Spanish? Ayer por la tarde means "yesterday evening" while en aquella época means "at that time". Other time markers include la semana pasada ("last week"), el mes pasado ("last month"), el año pasado ("last year"), en ese momento ("in that moment"), and todos los días ("all the time"). How many past tenses are there in Spanish? In Spanish, there are the preterite, imperfect, and past perfect tenses, as well as other less commonly used past tenses, some of which use the subjunctive mood. How often do you use "de vez en cuando" in Spanish conversations? De vez en cuando means "once in a while" or "from time to time." It is used to express actions that occur occasionally. For example, De vez en cuando voy al cine con mis amigos ("I go to the movies with my friends once in a while"). Summing Up: Imperfect vs Preterite Tense - Which To Use & When Learning all of this can be very beneficial for anyone who plans on traveling to a Spanish-speaking country. Spanish-language learners often struggle with these two past tenses and when to use them. The good news is that the preterite and imperfect tenses in Spanish follow clear-cut rules and have fairly easy verb endings to learn. It's just about practice. The more you engage with the Spanish language and grammar studies, the sooner you'll get the hang of it. And it's ok to make mistakes - even advanced learners mix these tenses up sometimes! Go over your notes consistently and use Spanish revision materials to reinforce your knowledge. These methods will help and provide clarity to even the most confused Spanish learner. One of the biggest challenges for English speakers learning Spanish is knowing when to use the imperfect (el imperfecto) vs the preterite (el pretérito). Both describe past actions but have different meanings. This guide breaks down the key differences with clear examples, comparison charts, and English translations so you can master these tenses like a native speaker! Imperfect (El Imperfecto)Preterite (El Pretérito)Habitual/repeated actions"I used to eat cereal every morning."→ Yo comía cereales todas las mañanas.Completed actions"I ate cereal this morning."→ Yo comí cereales esta mañana.Ongoing past actions"She was singing when I arrived."→ Ella cantaba cuando yo llegué.Actions with clear start/end"She sang at the concert."→ Ella cantó en el concierto.Background descriptions"It was a dark and stormy night."→ Era una noche oscura y tormentosa.Sequences of events"First I studied, then I went out."→ Primero estudié, luego salí.Emotions/age/time"I was happy as a child."→ Yo era feliz de niño.Sudden changes"I became happy when I won."→ Me alegré cuando gané. Habitual actions (used to/would) Ongoing actions (was/were + -ing) Descriptions (age, time, weather, emotions) Setting the scene in stories Spanish (Imperfecto)English TranslationYo jugaba fútbol todos los días.I used to play soccer every day.Ella era muy simpática cuando era niña.She was very nice when she was a child.Eran las tres de la tarde.It was three in the afternoon.Lluvia mucho cuando llegamos.It was raining a lot when we arrived. Tip: The imperfect is like a background setting—it tells us what was happening over time. Want more? See our full guide on How to Use the Imperfect Tense in Spanish for conjugation rules and practice exercises. Completed actions (one-time events) Actions with clear start/end Sequences of events (first X happened, then Y) Sudden changes Spanish (Preterito)English TranslationAyer comí paella.Yesterday, I ate paella.Ellos viajaron a España el año pasado.They traveled to Spain last year.De repente, empezó a llover.Suddenly, it started to rain.Primerο estudíe, luego salí con amigos.First, I studied, then I went out with friends. Tip: The preterite is like a snapshot—it tells us what happened at a specific moment. Need help conjugating? Check out our Preterite Tense Conjugation Guide with all the irregular verbs. ImperfectPreteriteYo vivía en Madrid.(I used to live in Madrid.Yo viví en Madrid.(I lived in Madrid [for a time].)Ella trabajaba cuando llamé.(She was working when I called.)Ella trabajó ayer.(She worked yesterday.) Chart: Key Differences AspectImperfectPreteriteType of ActionOngoing, habitualCompleted, one-timeDurationNo defined endHas clear start/endExample TriggersSiempre, a menudo, cada díaAyer, anoche, el lunes pasado Mistake: Using preterite for "was/were + -ing" Correction: Use imperfect for ongoing actions. Estudié cuando sonó el teléfono. (Incorrect) Estudiaba cuando sonó el teléfono. (I was studying when the phone rang.) Mistake: Using imperfect for completed actions Correction: Use preterite for finished events. Viajaba a México el año pasado. (Incorrect) Viajé a México el año pasado. (I traveled to Mexico last year.) Cuando era niño, siempre __ (jugar) en el parque.→ Answer: jugaba (imperfect - habitual action) Ayer, yo __ (comer) una pizza entera.→ Answer: comí (preterite - completed action) Mientras ella __ (leer), él __ (llegar).→ Answer: leía, llegó (imperfect for ongoing, preterite for interruption) Want more practice? Try our Spanish Past Tenses Quiz! ✓ Think about duration → Was it ongoing (imperfect) or finished (preterite)?✓ Look for trigger words → Siempre (imperfect) vs ayer (preterite)✓ Practice with real examples → Watch Spanish shows and note tense usage Think you've mastered the difference? Challenge yourself with our 15-question Imperfect vs Preterite Quiz and get instant feedback on your answers! Test your knowledge of Spanish past tenses! Read each sentence and choose whether the verb should be in the imperfect or preterite tense. Click "Show Answer" to check your understanding. 1. Cuando __ (ser) niño, siempre __ (jugar) en el parque. Answer: era, jugaba Both verbs are in imperfect because they describe habitual past actions (being a child and playing regularly). 2. Ayer, yo __ (comer) una pizza entera. Answer: comí Preterite is used because it's a completed action at a specific time (yesterday). 3. Mientras ella __ (leer), él __ (llegar). Answer: leía, llegó Imperfect for ongoing action (reading), preterite for the interrupting action (arriving). 4. El año pasado, nosotros __ (viajar) a España por dos semanas. Answer: viajamos Preterite is used because it's a completed action with a specific duration. 5. Cuando __ (tener) diez años, __ (romperse) el brazo. Answer: tenía, me rompí Imperfect for age/background information, preterite for the specific completed action. 6. Generalmente, ellos __ (cenar) a las 8, pero anoche __ (cenar) a las 10. Answer: cenaban, cenaron Imperfect for habitual action, preterite for the specific exception. 7. La semana pasada, tú __ (estar) enfermo por tres días. Answer: estuviste Preterite is used for a state that lasted for a specific, limited time. 8. Cuando vivía en México, __ (llover) mucho durante el verano. Answer: llovía Imperfect is used for weather conditions in the past, especially habitual ones. 9. Ayer por la noche, __ (ver) una película muy interesante. Answer: vi Preterite is used for a completed action at a specific time (last night). 10. De repente, el teléfono __ (sonar) mientras yo __ (dormir). Answer: sonó, dormía Preterite for the sudden action (rang), imperfect for the ongoing action (was sleeping). 11. Cada verano, mis abuelos __ (venir) a visitarnos. Answer: venían Imperfect is used for repeated/habitual actions in the past. 12. El mes pasado, yo __ (empezar) a tomar clases de guitarra. Answer: empecé Preterite is used for the beginning of an action at a specific time. 13. Cuando __ (conocer) a mi esposa, ella __ (trabajar) en un banco. Answer: conocí, trabajaba Preterite for the moment of meeting, imperfect for the background situation. 14. Antes __ (haber) más árboles en este parque. Answer: había Imperfect is used for describing how things were in the past. 15. Ellos __ (casarse) en 2010 y todavía __ (estar) felices juntos. Answer: se casaron, están Preterite for the completed action (got married), present for current state.