

Imperfect vs. Preterite Tenses

There are two past tenses in Spanish. The **Preterite** tense is for one-time events in the past. For example:

Yo comí con ella ayer.
I ate lunch with her yesterday.

Tú compraste el sofá verde.
You bought the green couch.

Marco rompió el brazo.
Marco broke his arm.

The **Imperfect** tense is used for actions that happened repeatedly, continuously, or over a period of time in the past. It is often used when describing a process or telling a story. The Imperfect tense verb endings are:

AR		ER - IR	
-aba	-ábamos	-ía	-íamos
-abas	-abais	-ías	-íais
-aba	-aban	-ía	-ían

For example:

Yo siempre caminaba a la escuela como niño.
I always walked to school as a child.

Ella no podía hablar hasta la edad de cinco.
She couldn't talk until the age of five.

Other examples of this are found in the English expressions, "was/were [doing]" and "used to [do]". For example:

Nosotros estábamos mirando la tele.
We were watching the tv.

Yo jugaba al béisbol todos los sábados.
I used to play baseball every Saturday.

You can use both tenses in the same sentence to describe a single event that occurred (preterite) while something else was happening (imperfect), both in the past. For example:

Yo andaba en la bicicleta cuando me caí y me rompí el brazo.
I was riding bicycle when I fell and broke my arm.

Cuando llegué a la casa, ella estaba durmiendo.
When I arrived at the house, she was sleeping.

Compare the following Preterite and Imperfect verb forms:

PRETERITE	IMPERFECT
<i>Yo lloré.</i> I cried.	<i>Yo lloraba.</i> I was crying / used to cry.
<i>Tú lloraste.</i> You cried.	<i>Tú llorabas.</i> You cried / used to cry.
<i>Ella lloró.</i> She cried.	<i>Ella lloraba.</i> She was crying / used to cry.

The nice thing about the Imperfect tense is that it is very patterned. There are only two irregular verbs—only two! These will look familiar; they are SER and IR. Here's how you conjugate them:

SER ~ to be		IR ~ to go	
era	éramos	iba	íbamos
eras	erais	ibas	ibais
era	eran	iba	iban

Expressions like those below are often used with the Imperfect tense:

a veces (sometimes)	mucho (a lot)
cada día (every day)	por un rato (for a while)
de vez en cuando (once in a while)	siempre (always)
frecuentemente (frequently)	tanto (so much/so often)
generalmente (usually)	todos los días (every day)

QUIZ

Translate the following sentences.

1. A veces pensaba en estudiar la medicina.
2. Corría en el Parque Tejada cada día.
3. De vez en cuando le llamaba a mi abuela.
4. El perro frecuentemente dormía en mi cuarto.
5. El marinero viejo hablaba mucho de un tesoro perdido.
6. Ana era mi amiga por un rato.
7. Generalmente no salíamos para comer.
8. Siempre te gustaba llevar mis ropas.
9. Tanto nos decía Mamá que es importante ser honesto.
10. Nosotros nadábamos en el lago todos los días.