

Combining Tenses in Spanish

We combine different tenses regularly in English, but as native speakers, we never stop to think about this—we just talk! For example:

I was cooking when the phone rang.
When the storm started, I was at home.
When I have more time, I will travel more often.
If I were rich, I'd have a big house.

What tenses are
being used, here?

Spanish speakers do the same thing, so you need the ability to distinguish the tenses to master this concept. For example:

<i>Yo <u>cocinaba</u> cuando <u>sonó</u> el teléfono.</i>	IMPERFECT, PRETERITE
<i>Cuando la tormenta <u>empezó</u>, <u>estaba</u> en casa.</i>	PRETERITE, IMPERFECT
<i>Cuando <u>tengo</u> más tiempo, <u>viajaré</u> más.</i>	PRESENT, FUTURE
<i>Si <u>fuera</u> rico, <u>tendría</u> una casa grande.</i>	SUBJUNCTIVE, CONDITIONAL

The two past tenses in Spanish are the perfect place to start because native speakers combine them often. First, let's review them:

Imperfect Tense

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

Preterite Tense

AR VERBS		ER & IR VERBS	
-é	-amos	-í	-imos
-aste	-asteis	-iste	-isteis
-ó	-aron	-ió	-ieron

Imagine that you want to say, "I was at home when you called."

"I was at home" is an action that occurs over an indefinite period of time in the past—the Imperfect past tense.

"You called" is a one-time, completed event that punctuates the continuous action—the Preterite past tense.

The word "when" is a conjunction—it links the two actions together.

Here are some other examples:

I was 18 years old when I graduated from high school.
Yo tenía dieciocho años cuando me gradué del colegio.

While she was singing, Enrique suddenly entered.
Mientras ella cantaba, de repente Enrique entró.

It was raining, then the sun came out.
Llovía, entonces salió el sol.

I was sleeping before my friend arrived.
Yo dormía antes de que mi amigo llegó.

We were going to the movies and we saw Juan.
Nosotros íbamos al cine y vimos a Juan.

It was a nice morning, so I went out for a walk.
Era una mañana bonita así que salí a caminar.

I wanted to go to the dance, but I broke my legs.
Yo quería ir al baile pero me rompí las piernas.

WARNING

Merely selecting different tenses for the sake of variety does not always work. Keep in mind that in English, there is only one past tense. In order to differentiate between continuous or completed actions, we have to add explanatory verbiage.

I walked to the park and I ate an ice cream. NOT ENOUGH INFORMATION

So, are "walked" and "ate" continuous or completed actions? As stated, we do not know. We would have to elaborate. For example:

I walked to the park, *then* ate an ice cream.
I walked to the park and ate an ice cream *along the way*.
I walked to the park. *Afterwards*, I was eating ice cream and...
I took a half-hour to walk to the park, *then* I ate an ice cream.

In Spanish, the tense implies the nature of the action: continuous or complete—so we do not have to elaborate as much, if at all.

Yo caminé al parque y comí un helado.
Yo caminaba al parque y comía un helado.
Yo caminé al parque y comía un helado.
Yo caminaba al parque y comí un helado.

PROBLEMATIC
PROBLEMATIC

To fix the problematic Spanish sentences above, revise:

Yo caminé al parque. Después, mientras comía un helado...
Yo caminaba al parque cuando decidí comer un helado.

Quiz

A. Translate and fill in the blanks with the correct verb form in the appropriate tense: Imperfect or Preterite.

besar	cambiar	dar	decir	esperar
explotar	llamar	llorar	mentir	morir
perder	ser	tener	visitar	zumbir

1. Ella siempre me ____ hasta que ____ mi número de teléfono.
2. Los chicos se ____ en los pasillos y por fin, el director ____ no.
3. Carlitos ____ pero su mamá le ____ una galleta para calmarle.
4. Nosotros le ____ a Rodolfo mucho, entonces se ____.
5. Todos los turistas ____ el tren cuando la bomba ____.
6. Ellos ____ caballos antes que ____ el rancho.
7. Tú ____ mi amigo pero me ____ por la última vez.

B. Translate the following sentences.

1. She was drinking my Pepsi when I returned to the table.
2. We used to talk every day, then he changed.
3. Pablo ate all the tacos while we were watching tv.
4. The class studied and studied and, at last, they took the test.
5. I was happy with the Wii until I saw the PlayStation.
6. Ana went out with Juan, Marco, Diego... but José never knew it.
7. Our team was winning—until we lost.
8. You had a good reputation before you danced with Osvaldo.
9. I always read novels, then I discovered the movies.
10. Y'all lived in an apartment before y'all bought the house, right?