# Preterite vs. Imperfect

The preterite and the imperfect are both past tenses. Sometimes an English past-tense sentence may be translated into Spanish with either the preterite or the imperfect, but usually these two tenses have very different meanings and implications. Let's examine each.

## IMPERFECT

The **imperfect** tense may be considered as the present tense back-shifted into the past. It is generally used to indicate:

**1.** A past action or state viewed as having been **in progress**. In English we often use "**was/were ...-ing**" for this. For example;

Mirábamos las mariposas.          *We were watching the butterflies.*

Mientras ella abría la puerta...   *As she opened (was opening) the door...*

**2.** **Descriptions** in the past such as what a person, thing, or situation was like. This includes situations such as giving the **time** of day, the **date**, the **weather**, one's **age**, etc. (Exception: when discussing the start, end, or change of something the preterite is normally used). For example;

Mi madre era muy baja, tenía 40 años, y   *My mother was very short, was 40 years old, and*
trabajaba sin fin.                         *worked constantly.*

Eran las diez de la noche, había una tormenta   *It was 10:00 at night, there was a terrible storm, and*
terrible, y teníamos miedo.                      *we were afraid.*

**3.** **Mental states** (in progress) in the past. **Thoughts**, **desires, and emotions** would be included here. For example;

No lo sabía.                              *I didn't know it/that.*

Creíamos que estábamos perdidos.          *We thought we were lost.*

**4.** A past action viewed as being customary or a **habit**. Note that English often uses **"would"** or **"used to"** to indicate this.

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

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# PRETERITE

The **preterite** 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 the past as **completed** or as something **instantaneous**. Note that expressions of time which limit the action to a specific period of time - even a long period such as thousands of years - generally indicate that the action is viewed as completed.

¿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.*

**2.** Give a series of **sequential actions** in the past, 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    *She worked a bit, went to McDonalds to eat, and then*
comer, y luego volvió a casa.               *returned home.*

**3.** Show the **start** or **finish** of an action, or indicate a **change**.

Se puso enojado.   *He got (became) angry.*

El cielo se anubló.   *The sky clouded up.*

Note, however, that it is possible to view start-up or ending actions as having been in progress, in which case the imperfect would be used. For example;

Se ponía enojado.   *He was getting angry.*

El cielo se anublaba.   *The sky was clouding up.*

**4.** Indicate an action as having **interrupted another action** (the other action is usually in the imperfect because it was in progress before being interrupted).

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