

The Past Tenses in Spanish¹ The Indicative Mood

Spanish (**THE INDICATIVE MOOD**) has **five** past tenses: **two simple** pasts and **three compound** pasts. The **two simple past** tenses are: the **PRETERITE** (*Pretérito Indefinido*) and the **IMPERFECT** (*Pretérito Imperfecto*). The **three compound** past tenses are: the **PRESENT PERFECT** (*Pretérito Perfecto*), the **PLUPERFECT** (*Pretérito Pluscuamperfecto*) and **PRETERITE PERFECT** (*Pretérito Aterior*).

The two **SIMPLE PAST TENSES**: the **PRETERITE** and the **IMPERFECT**.

The Preterite (<i>Pretérito Indefinido</i>)	The Imperfect (<i>Pretérito Imperfecto</i>)																																																								
<p>The Preterite refers to an action completed in the past. It is used to describe an event that took place within a limited period of time and its beginning and/or end is indicated.</p> <p>To form the Preterite of regular -ar, -er and -ir verbs, the following personal endings (<i>after dropping the infinitive ending</i>) are added to the stem of the verb:</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width: 15%;">Person</th> <th style="width: 20%;">hablar</th> <th style="width: 20%;">comer</th> <th style="width: 20%;">vivir</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>(yo)</td> <td>hablé</td> <td>comí</td> <td>viví</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(tú)</td> <td>hablaste</td> <td>comiste</td> <td>viviste</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(usted, él, ella)</td> <td>habló</td> <td>comió</td> <td>vivió</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(nosotros/as)</td> <td>hablamos</td> <td>comimos</td> <td>vivimos</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(vosotros/as)</td> <td>hablasteis</td> <td>comisteis</td> <td>vivisteis</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(ustedes, ellos/as)</td> <td>hablaron</td> <td>comieron</td> <td>vivieron</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Note:</p> <p>a) The same endings for -er and -ir verbs are used.</p> <p>b) Because of the spelling patterns ca, que, qui, co, cu; ga, gue, go, gu; za, ce, ci, zo, zu, some verbs have spelling change. Ex: buscar - (yo) busqué jugar - (yo) jugué empezar - (yo) empecé</p> <p>c) -er and -ir verbs whose stems end in a vowel have a spelling change in the third person singular and plural. The -ió and -ieron endings are spelled -yó and -yeron. Ex: creer (él) creyó (ellos) oyeron leer (él) leyó (ellos) leyeron contribuir (él) contribuyó (ellos) contribuyeron incluir (él) incluyó (ellos) incluyeron distribuir (él) distribuyó (ellos) distribuyeron construir (él) construyó (ellos) construyeron</p>	Person	hablar	comer	vivir	(yo)	hablé	comí	viví	(tú)	hablaste	comiste	viviste	(usted, él, ella)	habló	comió	vivió	(nosotros/as)	hablamos	comimos	vivimos	(vosotros/as)	hablasteis	comisteis	vivisteis	(ustedes, ellos/as)	hablaron	comieron	vivieron	<p>The Imperfect refers to progressive actions in the past that were going on for an indefinite period of time. It is used to describe continued, habitual, or repeated actions in the past and provides background information such as time, weather, age, outward and physical appearances, feelings, beliefs, and emotional states. The Imperfect is translated into English as used to, was (were) + ing, and would. To form the Imperfect of regular -ar, -er and -ir verbs, the following personal endings (<i>after dropping the infinitive ending</i>) are added to the stem of the verb:</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width: 15%;">Person</th> <th style="width: 20%;">hablar</th> <th style="width: 20%;">comer</th> <th style="width: 20%;">vivir</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>(yo)</td> <td>hablaba</td> <td>comía</td> <td>vivía</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(tú)</td> <td>hablabas</td> <td>comías</td> <td>vivías</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(usted, él, ella)</td> <td>hablaba</td> <td>comías</td> <td>vivía</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(nosotros/as)</td> <td>hablábamos</td> <td>comíamos</td> <td>vivíamos</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(vosotros/as)</td> <td>hablabais</td> <td>comíais</td> <td>vivíais</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(ustedes, ellos/as)</td> <td>hablaban</td> <td>comían</td> <td>vivían</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Note:</p> <p>a) The same endings for -er and -ir verbs are used.</p> <p>b) The Spanish Imperfect is equivalent to three English forms: (yo) Trabajaba en California. I used to work in California. I was working in California. I worked in California.</p>	Person	hablar	comer	vivir	(yo)	hablaba	comía	vivía	(tú)	hablabas	comías	vivías	(usted, él, ella)	hablaba	comías	vivía	(nosotros/as)	hablábamos	comíamos	vivíamos	(vosotros/as)	hablabais	comíais	vivíais	(ustedes, ellos/as)	hablaban	comían	vivían
Person	hablar	comer	vivir																																																						
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¹ Visit the Website [Spanish Verb Form](#) to get the meaning of the verbs and their conjugation:

IRREGULAR VERBS

PRETERITE

IMPERFECT

a) Irregular **Preterite** verbs have irregularities in the stem and the ending:

Person	estar	saber	decir
(yo)	estuve	supe	dije
(tú)	estuviste	supiste	dijiste
(usted, él, ella)	estuvo	supo	dijo
(nosotros/as)	estuvimos	supimos	dijimos
(vosotros/as)	estuvisteis	supisteis	dijisteis
(ustedes, ellos/as)	estuvieron	supieron	dijeron

Other irregular verbs:

- **andar:** **anduve, iste, o, imos, isteis, ieron**
- **tener:** **tuve, iste, o, imos, isteis, ieron**
- **poder:** **pude, iste, o, imos, isteis, ieron**
- **poner:** **puse, iste, o, imos, isteis, ieron**
- **querer:** **quise, iste, o, imos, isteis, ieron**
- **hacer:** **hice, hiciste, hizo, hicimos, hicisteis, hicieron**
- **venir:** **vine, iste, o, imos, isteis, ieron**
- **traer:** **traje, iste, o, imos, isteis, ieron**
- **producir:** **produje, iste, o, imos, isteis, ieron**
- **dar:** **di, diste, dio, dimos, disteis, dieron**
- **ir/ser:** **fui, fuiste, fue, fuimos, fuisteis, fueron**
- **haber:** **hubo** (there was, there were)
- **caber:** **cupe, iste, o, imos, isteis, ieron**
- **traducir:** **traduje, iste, o, imos, isteis, ieron**

b) Irregular **Preterite** of **-ir** verbs. All the **-ir** verbs that have stem changes in the present tense also have changes in the **third person** singular and plural: **o** changes into **u**, and **e** into **i**. Ex:

- **dormir:** **dormí, dormiste, durmió, dormimos, dormisteis, durmieron**
- **pedir:** **pedí, pediste, pidió, pedimos, pedisteis, pidieron**
- **morir:** **morí, moriste, murió, morimos, moristeis, murieron**
- **seguir:** **seguí, seguiste, siguió, seguimos, seguisteis, siguieron**
- **preferir:** **preferí, preferiste, prefirió, preferimos, preferisteis, prefirieron**
- **conseguir:** **conseguí, conseguiste, consiguió, conseguimos, conseguisteis, consiguieron**
- **sentir:** **sentí, sentiste, sintió, sentimos, sentisteis, sintieron**
- **mentir:** **mentí, mentiste, mintió, mentimos, mentisteis, mintieron**
- **sugerir:** **sugerí, sugeriste, sugirió, sugerimos, sugeristeis, sugirieron**
- **repetir:** **repetí, repetiste, repitió, repetimos, repetisteis, repitieron**
- **freír:** **freí, freiste, frió, freímos, freísteis, frieron**
- **reír:** **reí, reíste, rió, reímos, reísteis, rieron**
- **sonreír:** **sonreí, sonreíste, sonrió, sonreímos, sonreísteis, sonrieron**
- **servir:** **serví, serviste, sirvió, servimos, servisteis, sirvieron**
- **despedir:** **despedí, despediste, despidió, despedimos, despedisteis, despidieron**
- **reñir:** **reñí, reñiste, rió, reñimos, reñisteis, riñeron**
- **medir:** **medí, mediste, midió, medimos, medisteis, midieron**

a) There are only three irregular verbs in the **Imperfect** tense. They are «**ir**», «**ser**», and «**ver**».

Person	ir
(yo)	iba
(tú)	ibas
(usted, él, ella)	iba
(nosotros/as)	íbamos
(vosotros/as)	ibais
(ustedes, ellos/as)	iban

Person	ser
(yo)	era
(tú)	eras
(usted, él, ella)	era
(nosotros/as)	éramos
(vosotros/as)	erais
(ustedes, ellos/as)	eran

Person	ver
(yo)	veía
(tú)	veías
(usted, él, ella)	veía
(nosotros/as)	veíamos
(vosotros/as)	veíais
(ustedes, ellos/as)	veían

The **Preterite** is used to describe a completed action or actions as well as the outcome of an action or actions. It refers to completed events that were repeated during a specific period of time or at one given point in time. The **Preterite** is also used when reference is made as to when an action began, ended, or both. Some common adverbial phrases that accompany the **Preterite** are:

- *ayer (yesterday)*
- *anteayer / antier (the day before yesterday)*
- *anoche (last night)*
- *el otro día (the other day)*
- *hace dos días / años (two days (years) ago)*
- *la semana pasada (last week)*
- *el año pasado (last year)*
- *durante tres siglos (for three centuries)*

a) Verbs with Special Meanings

Several verbs have a special meaning when used in the **Preterite**. Most of them denote mental activity and are expressed by the **Imperfect** in the past. When used in the **Preterite** their meaning is quite special. **Ex:**

- Marta no **quiso** salir. (*Martha refused to leave*)
- (él) **Pudo** huir. (*He managed to escape*)
- Carlos no **pudo** hacerlo. (*Charles couldn't do it. / but he tried/*)
- (ellos) Lo **supieron** ayer. (*They found it out yesterday*)
- Juan **conoció** a María. (*John met Mary*)

b) Completed action

The **Preterite** is used to express an action definitely begun and completed in the past even if the particular action lasted for some time. **Ex:**

- Mi hermano **vino** a mi casa ayer. (*My brother came to my house yesterday*)
- (yo) **Hablé** ayer por teléfono con mi mamá. (*I spoke with my mum yesterday*)
- Ayer (yo) **estuve** en Miami Beach. (*Yesterday I was in Miami Beach*)

The **Imperfect** tense is much less commonly used in English than in Spanish. Since the word **imperfect** means **not perfected** or **not completed**, the **Imperfect** tense is used to express continuance, to express those actions in the past, which are either customary or habitual. The **Imperfect** ignores the outcome of an action and implies continuation of an action or actions.

It also gives background information. Some common adverbial expressions which would indicate continuance and thus demand the use of the imperfect are:

- *Siempre (always)*
- *con frecuencia / frecuentemente (frequently)*
- *a menudo (often)*
- *a veces (sometimes)*
- *de vez en cuando (from time to time, sometimes)*
- *muchas veces (many times)*
- *cada año / día / mes (every year / day / month)*
- *todos los días / jueves (every day / Thursday)*

a) Mental Activity

Since most mental process involves duration or continuance verbs, which deal with mental processes, are often expressed in the **Imperfect** tense. Common verbs of this nature are: **querer** (to want), **preferir** (to prefer), **saber** (to know), **sentir** (to be sorry, regret, feel) **desear** (to desire), **poder** (to be able) **pensar** (to think), **creer** (to believe). **Ex:**

- Martha no **quería** salir. (*Martha didn't want to leave*)
- (él) No **podía** huir. (*He couldn't escape*)
- Carlos no **podía** hacerlo. (*Charles wasn't able to do it*)
- (ellos) Lo **sabían** ayer. (*They knew it yesterday*)
- Juan **conocía** a María. (*John knew Mary*)

b) No completed action

The imperfect is used to express a continuing action in the past. **Ex:**

- Mi hermano **venía** a mi casa todos los domingos. (*My brother used to come to my place on Sundays*)
- (yo) **Hablaba** con frecuencia por teléfono con mi mamá. (*I used to talk with my mum on the phone.*)
- Ayer (nosotros) **estábamos** en Miami Beach. (*Yesterday we were in Miami Beach.*)

c) Two actions in one sentence

Frequently there is more than one action expressed in the same sentence. In order to determine the tense to be used for each verb, it is helpful to think of stage. Any action that is carried out by the performers on the stage is in the **Preterite**. **Ex:**

Juan **llegó** y yo me **fui**.

Cuando Juan **llegó**, ...

Sometimes the tense will change depending upon the idea that the speaker wishes to convey. Analyze the following:

(él) Me **preguntó** y (yo) le **contesté**.
(Here the speaker is merely reporting what took place. He asked me and I answered him.)

(él) Me **preguntaba** y (yo) le **contestaba**.
(Here the speaker wishes to describe the background, what was taking place. He was asking me and I was answering him.)

c) Description in the past

The **Imperfect** tense is used to express description in the past. Anything that is scenery or that takes place in the background is expressed by the **Imperfect** **Ex:**

- **Hacía** buen tiempo.
- (nosotros) **Teníamos** hambre.
- (ella) **Era** rubia.
- **Eran** las tres de la tarde.

... yo **trabajaba**.

Yo **trabajaba**, mientras Juan **conversaba**.

d) With the Time Expression «*hacía*».

The **Imperfect** tense is use with the time expression «*hacía*». Note that in English the **pluperfect** tense is used. **Ex:**

Hacía dos años que (él) **estaba** en Toronto.
(He had been in Toronto for two years)

Hacía un año que (yo) lo **sabía**.
(I had known it for a year)