

Preterite vs Imperfect

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Choosing the right Spanish past tense

PRETERITE = Completed actions, clear start/end. "What happened?"

IMPERFECT = Ongoing/habitual, descriptions, background. "What was happening?"

PRETERITE (Completed)

Use for:

- Single completed actions
- Actions with specific timeframe
- Chain of events (then... then...)
- Beginning/end of action • Interrupting action

IMPERFECT (Ongoing)

Use for:

- Habitual/repeated past actions
- Descriptions (weather, age, feelings)
- Background/setting of a story
- Ongoing action (was doing) • Time & age

Trigger Words:

ayer, anoche, la semana pasada, en 2020, el lunes,
hace dos días, de repente, una vez, primero

Trigger Words:

siempre, nunca, a veces, todos los días, cada semana,
mientras, cuando, generalmente, de niño/joven

Examples:

Ayer comí pizza.

Yesterday I ate pizza.

Llegué a las tres.

I arrived at three.

Examples:

De niño, jugaba mucho.

As a child, I used to play a lot.

Hacía sol y calor.

It was sunny and hot.

Verbs That Change Meaning

Verb	Preterite	Imperfect
conocer	met (first time)	knew (acquainted)
saber	found out	knew (info)
querer	tried to	wanted
no querer	refused	didn't want
poder	managed to	could
tener	got/received	had

Key Pattern: Interruption

IMPERFECT (background) + cuando + PRETERITE (interruption)

Estudiaba cuando llegó mi amigo. (I was studying when my friend arrived.)

Useful Resources

- **Preterite vs Imperfect Guide**
spanishgrammar.co.uk/preterite-vs-imperfect
- **Preterite Tense**
spanishgrammar.co.uk/preterite-tense
- **Imperfect Tense**
spanishgrammar.co.uk/imperfect-tense