***Preterit vs Imperfect: When to Use What***

**Imperfect Tense**

Regular forms of the imperfect are formed by adding the following endings to the stem of the verb:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **-ar verbs**  aba abas aba ábamos abais aban | **example: hablar**  hablaba hablabas hablaba hablábamos hablabais hablaban |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **-er verbs -ir verbs**  ía ías ía íamos íais ían | **example: vivir**  vivía vivías vivía vivíamos vivíais vivían |

Only **three verbs** are irregular in the imperfect:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **ser**  era eras era éramos erais eran | **ver**  veía veías veía veíamos veíais veían | **ir**  iba ibas iba íbamos ibais iban |

**Expressions that signal use of imperfect** The imperfect is frequently associated with phrases that describe the frequency of past actions. Words and phrases that indicate repetitive, vague or non-specific time frames, and therefore signal the use of the imperfect.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **a menudo** often  **a veces** sometimes  **cada día** every day  **cada año** every year  **con frecuencia** frequently  **de vez en cuando** from time to time | **en aquella época** at that time **frecuentemente** frequently  **generalmente** usually  **muchas veces** many times  **mucho** a lot **nunca** never  **por un rato** for awhile  **siempre** always | **tantas veces** so many times  **todas las semanas** every week  **todos los días** every day  **todo el tiempo** all the time  **varias veces** several times |

**The imperfect** is used for actions in the past that are seen as **incomplete** or that occurred **numerous** **times/became a habit.** Use of the imperfect tense implies that the past action did not have a definite beginning or a definite end. The imperfect tells us **in general** when an action took place.

Something we used to do/something we were doing, or to describe a setting and/or people in the past.

**Preterite vs. Imperfect**

Compare the verb "hablar" conjugated in the preterite and the imperfect.

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| --- | --- |
| **Preterite** | **Imperfect** |
|  |  |
| Hablé | hablaba |
| Hablaste | hablabas |
| Habló | hablaba |
| Hablamos | hablábamos |
| Hablasteis | hablabais |
| Hablaron | hablaban |

Compare the verb "comer" conjugated in the preterite and the imperfect.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Preterite** | **Imperfect** |
|  |  |
| Comí | Comía |
| Comiste | Comías |
| Comió | Comía |
| Comimos | Comíamos |
| Comisteis | Comíais |
| Comieron | Comían |

Compare the verb "vivir" conjugated in the preterite and the imperfect.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Preterite** | **Imperfect** |
|  |  |
| Viví | Vivía |
| Viviste | Vivías |
| Vivió | Vivía |
| Vivimos | Vivíamos |
| Vivisteis | Vivíais |
| Vivieron | Vivían |

**When do we use the preterite?**

**The preterite** is used for actions in the past that are seen as **completed**. Use of the preterite tense implies that the past action had a definite beginning and definite end.

The preterite tells us **specifically** when an action took place.

Something we did..

**Expressions that signal use of preterite** Some words and phrases indicate **specific** **time** **frames**, and therefore signal the use of the preterite.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **ayer** (yesterday)  **anteayer** (the day before yesterday)  **anoche** (last night)  **desde el primer momento** (from the first moment)  **durante dos siglos** (for two centuries) | **el otro día** (the other day)  **en ese momento** (at that moment)  **entonces** (then)  **esta mañana** (this morning)  **esta tarde** (this afternoon)  **la semana pasada** (last week) | **el mes pasado** (last month)  **el año pasado** (last year)  **hace dos días, años** (two days, years ago)  **ayer por la mañana** (yesterday morning)  **ayer por la tarde** (yesterday afternoon) |