***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**abaabasabaábamosabaisaban  | **example: hablar**hablabahablabashablabahablábamoshablabaishablaban  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **-er verbs-ir verbs**íaíasíaíamosíaisían  | **example: vivir**vivíavivíasvivíavivíamosvivíaisvivían |

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

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **ser**eraeraseraéramoseraiseran  | **ver**veíaveíasveíaveíamosveíaisveían  | **ir**ibaibasibaíbamosibaisiban  |

**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.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **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.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **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)  |