**Apuntes: Pretérito vs. imperfecto**

The preterit and imperfect are both simple (i.e., non-compound or one-word) tenses indicating a past-time action or state. Sometimes a given English past-tense sentence may be translated into Spanish with either the preterit or the imperfect, but these two tenses have different meanings or implications.

The **imperfect** tense may be considered the present tense backshifted into past time. It is generally used to indicate:

1. A past action or state being viewed as in progress. In English we often use the past progressive for this: “was/were ...-ing”.

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| **Mirábamos las mariposas.** |  | *We were watching the butterflies.* |
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| **Mientras ella abría la** **puerta...** |  | *As she opened (was opening) the door...* |

1. Two frequent examples of states in past time which are normally viewed as in progress and thus given in the imperfect:
   1. Descriptions in past time, that is, what a person, thing, or situation was like. This also includes situations such as giving the time of day, the date, the weather, one's age, etc. (unless a change or the start/end of a state is indicated, in which case the preterit is normally used).

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| **Mi madre era muy baja, tenía** **40 años, y trabajaba sin fin.** |  | *My mother was very short, was 40 years old, and workedconstantly.* |
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| **Eran las diez de la noche,** **había una tormenta terrible,** **yteníamos miedo.** |  | *It was 10:00 at night, there was a terrible storm out, and wewere afraid.* |

* 1. Mental states (in progress) in past time.

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| **No lo sabía.** |  | *I didn't know it/that.* |
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| **Creíamos que estábamos perdidos.** |  | *We thought we were lost.* |

1. A past action viewed as being customary or habitual. Note that English often uses “would” or “used to” to indicate this.

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

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The **preterit** 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 past time as completed or as something instantaneous. Note that expressions of time which limit the action to a more or less specific period of time —even a long period such as thousands of years— generally indicate that the action is being viewed as completed and suggest the preterit.

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| **¿Quién rompió el juguete?** |  | *Who broke the toy?* |
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| **Elena bailó toda la noche.** |  | *Elena danced all night.* |
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| **Los Gómez vivieron allí seis años.** |  | *Mr. and Mrs. Gómez lived there six years.* |

1. Give a series of sequential actions in past time, that is, “first this happened, then something else occurred, and then...”

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| **Vine, vi, vencí.** |  | *I came, I saw, I conquered.* |
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| **Trabajó un poco, fue a** **McDonalds a comer, y luego** **volvió a casa.** |  | *She worked a bit, went to McDonalds to eat, and then returnedhome.* |

1. Show the start or finish of an action or state, or indicate a change in a state in past time.

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| **Se puso enojado.** |  | *He got (became) angry.* |
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| **El cielo se anubló.** |  | *The sky clouded up.* |

1. Note, however, that it is possible to view start-up and ending actions as in progress, in which case the imperfect would be used [**Se ponía enojado.** *He was getting angry.* / **El cielo se anublaba.** *The sky was clouding  up.*].
2. Indicate an action as interrupting a previously existing action or stated (usually given in the imperfect).

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| **Mientras los demás dormían**, **María se escapó.** |  | *While the rest were sleeping, María escaped.* | |
| [[Practice 1](http://users.ipfw.edu/jehle/courses/S210/PRETIMP2.HTM)] [[Practice 2](http://users.ipfw.edu/jehle/COURSES/s210/PRETIM22.HTM)] |  | | [[S210 Main Page](http://users.ipfw.edu/jehle/S210.HTM)] | |

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