

Unit 2

TENSE: Imperfect

TIME: Refers to past; non-specific, continuous

KEY PHRASES: "Used to," "was + -ing," "would," "always" etc.

STRUCTURE: Simple tense; verb stem + ending

The Imperfect Tense

We use the imperfect when referring to actions that took place in the past *either repeatedly or over an extended period of time*. Unlike the preterite, which is used to specify an action either at a particular point in time or number of times, the imperfect indicates that an action took place during a non-specified amount of time or was repeated an indefinite number of times.

The element of time, though certainly in the past, is necessarily *not* specific. It is impossible to determine when the action began or ended, or the exact time or number of times it occurred, for this specificity is irrelevant.

Consider the following sentences:

I used to live in St. Louis.

John always ate cereal for breakfast.

Mary was a good conversationalist.

In the first sentence, the message clearly states that I lived in St. Louis in the past; however, *when or for how long* is not mentioned. While this action could be quantified (i.e., I lived in St. Louis *for four years*), in this sentence the speaker has chosen not to do so. Thus, in this case, the length of time is irrelevant.

In the second sentence, we know that in the past John ate cereal for breakfast. The addition of the word *always*, however, indicates (1) that he did so many, many times and (2) it would be virtually impossible to find out exactly how many times he did eat cereal for breakfast. In this case, the number of times cannot be determined.

The last sentence is a description of something that was ongoing. In fact, there is no real action involved other than being. The time involved most likely would be "most of Mary's life." As in the first sentence, the exact amount of time is irrelevant in this context, and as in the second example, it would be impossible to determine *exactly* how long she was able to keep up her end of a conversation.

The essence of the imperfect tense is that the specific elements of time are missing. Messages in the imperfect do not tell us *when specifically*, rather *when in general*.

Regular Verbs in the Imperfect

Nearly all verbs in the imperfect are regular. Only three verbs—*ser*, *ir*, and *ver*—are irregular. To form the imperfect, you will do the following:

-ar verbs: drop the -ar and add:

-aba -ábamos
-abas -abais
-aba -aban

Consider the verbs **hablar** and **estudiar**:

<i>(I used to speak, you used to speak, etc.)</i>	<i>(I used to study, you used to study, etc.)</i>
hablaba hablábamos	estudiaba estudiábamos
hablabas hablabais	estudiabas estudiabais
hablaba hablaban	estudiaba estudiaban

-er and -ir verbs: drop the -er or -ir and add:

-ía -íamos
-ías -íais
-ía -ían

Consider the verbs **comer** and **vivir**:

<i>(I used to eat, you used to eat, etc.)</i>	<i>(I used to live, you used to live, etc.)</i>
comía comíamos	vivía vivíamos
comías comíais	vivías vivíais
comía comían	vivía vivían

Irregular Verbs in the Imperfect

Only the following three verbs are formed irregularly in the imperfect:

ser	ir	ver
<i>(I used to be, etc.)</i>	<i>(I used to go, etc.)</i>	<i>(I used to see, etc.)</i>
era éramos	iba íbamos	veía veíamos
eras erais	ibas ibais	veías veíais
era eran	iba iban	veía veían

Note that in *all* verbs—regular and irregular—the first and third person singular are identical.

When to Use the Imperfect

Habitual or continuous action in the past: In English we often use the phrase “used to,” as in “I *used to* live in Texas” or “They *used to* eat in that restaurant.” In these cases there is no indication of when or how many times this action occurred or for how long.

¿Cuál es verdadero o falso para ti?

- _____ 1. Vivías en Nueva York.
- _____ 2. Jugabas con muñecas.
- _____ 3. De niño/a, tenías un perro.
- _____ 4. Mirabas "Barrio Sésamo" ("*Sesame Street*").
- _____ 5. Trabajabas en un restaurante.
- _____ 6. Leías la revista "Highlights."
- _____ 7. Masticabas chicle en la escuela.
- _____ 8. Montabas en triciclo.
- _____ 9. Almorzabas en una cafetería.
- _____ 10. Ibas a la escuela en autobús.
- _____ 11. Saltabas en la cama.
- _____ 12. Tomabas muchas vitaminas.

ejercicio**II-2-1**

1. I used to study with John. _____
2. He used to work in a bank. _____
3. We used to live in an apartment. _____
4. They used to write notes in class. _____
5. You used to read lots of magazines. _____
6. You (*pl. fam.*) used to open the windows in January. _____
- _____
7. I used to make my bed every morning. _____
8. Mickey Mantle played (used to play) baseball for the Yankees. _____
- _____
9. They used to call us every night. _____
10. Where did you use to work? _____

11. Where did you (*pl. form.*) use to live? _____
12. He used to swim in our pool. _____
13. Mark used to be president of our club. _____
14. I used to go to Florida every winter. _____
15. We used to invite everybody to our parties. _____

Basic, simple description: Very often an important element in sentences in the imperfect is simply a description of how things were. Whereas the preterite often emphasizes physical action, the imperfect frequently focuses on background description. The reference is to what things were like, rather than what happened. Note that the verbs *ser*, which is used for description, origin, and time and *estar*, used to denote location, short-term conditions, and the result of an action, are used frequently in such situations. Consider the following sentences:

I *bought* a car. **preterite** (specific action)
Compré un coche.

The car *was* red. **imperfect** (description)
El coche era rojo.

Ana *got married*. **preterite** (specific action)
Ana se casó.

Ana *was married*. **imperfect** (description)
Ana estaba casada.

ejercicio	II-2-2
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¿Qué era?

(What was each of the following people? Choose from the selections that follow.)

1. Jimmy Carter era _____
2. Frank Lloyd Wright era _____
3. Bozo era _____
4. Margaret Mead era _____
5. Andy Taylor y Barney Fife eran _____
6. John Steinbeck era _____
7. Liberace era _____
8. Aristóteles era _____
9. Pablo Picasso era _____
10. Sigmund Freud era _____

11. Fred Astaire y Ginger Rogers eran _____
12. Cristóbal Colón era _____

filósofo
psiquiatra
policía
arquitecto

payaso
pianista
bailarines
Presidente

antropóloga
explorador
escritor
pintor

ejercicio

II-2-3

1. My father was a farmer (*granjero*). _____
2. Mary had a little lamb (*corderito*). _____
3. We wore uniforms to school. _____
4. I was embarrassed (*avergonzado*). _____
5. The store didn't have the shirt that I wanted. _____
6. The windows were open, but the door was closed. _____
7. Susana was pregnant (*embarazada*). _____
8. You (*pl. fam.*) wore (were wearing) silly hats. _____
9. George was tall and handsome. _____
10. The cat was in the attic (*el desván*). _____
11. My pen didn't work. _____
12. Where was the money? _____
13. I had lots of friends at camp (*el campamento*). _____
14. The cat was black and white. _____
15. The monster had two heads. _____

“-ing” in the past: The addition of *-ing* to a verb in English indicates an action in progress, e.g., “I am working.” References to such actions in the past (“I was working”) generally omit mention of a specific length of time, and thus are in the imperfect. We often use this format to describe two actions going on at the same time, e.g., I *was playing* the guitar and John *was singing* (Yo *tocaba* la guitarra y Juan *cantaba*). See also the Progressive mood in the past (page 117).

ejercicio

II-2-4

1. I was washing the dishes. _____
2. Nobody was listening while the politician was speaking. _____

3. He was walking and I was running. _____
4. They were listening to the radio while they were studying. _____

5. We were trying to sleep, but the baby was crying (*llorar*). _____

6. Why were you watching television while I was studying? _____

7. The children were playing in the garden. _____
8. We were living in a glass house. _____
9. You (*pl. fam.*) were selling T-shirts (*camisetas*) on the corner (*la esquina*). _____

10. I was suffering from a cold (*el resfriado*). _____
11. The frogs were jumping (*saltar*) near the lake. _____
12. I was taking a shower while they were eating breakfast. _____

13. Carmen was preparing dinner. _____
14. We were thinking about you a lot. _____
15. While she was explaining the theory (*la teoría*), everybody was leaving. _____

Mental or emotional action or physical sensation: Feelings and mental actions usually are not bound by time or number of occurrences. These actions are not physical; rather, they describe a state of being, and thus are continuous. In fact, several of the verbs listed below change meaning significantly when used in the preterite (see preterite, page 99).

examples:

Yo **esperaba** el bus.
I *waited/was waiting* for the bus.

No **creíamos** el cuento.
We didn't believe the story.

Estabas cansado.
You were tired.

Queríais ir al cine.
You wanted to go to the movies.

Romeo **amaba** mucho a Julieta.
Romeo *loved* Juliet a lot.

Ellos **tenían** veinte dólares esta mañana.
They *had* twenty dollars this morning.

Hacía buen tiempo.
It was nice out.

Me dolían los oídos.
My ears hurt.

Some verbs often used in the imperfect:

amar	to love	molestar	to be bothersome to
conocer	to know a person	odiar	to hate
creer	to believe	pensar (en)	to think (about)
doler	to be painful to	poder	to be able to
esperar	to hope, wait (for)	querer	to want
estar	to be	saber	to know
gustar	to be pleasing to	sentir (<i>e</i> → <i>ie</i>)	to regret, feel sorry
llevarse bien con	to get along with	sentirse (<i>e</i> → <i>ie</i>)	to feel

¿Verdadero o falso?

(Note that some of the following sentences contain both an imperfect and a preterite clause.)

- _____ 1. Esta mañana no comí nada porque no tenía hambre.
- _____ 2. Dumbo podía volar porque tenía unas orejas enormes.
- _____ 3. Fui al cine la semana pasada porque quería ver una película.
- _____ 4. Elvis Presley era un cantante muy popular que también actuó en varias películas.
- _____ 5. John Lennon tocaba la guitarra para los Beatles y también escribió muchas canciones.
- _____ 6. De niño, yo tenía un televisor en mi dormitorio y lo miraba mucho.

ejercicio

II-2-5

1. I knew the answer. _____
2. Jane hated the color red. _____
3. Did you know him? _____