

The Imperfect Tense

TENSE: Imperfect

TIME: Refers to

past: non-specific,

continuous

KEY PHRASES: "Used

to," "was + -ing,"

"would," "always"

STRUCTURE: Simple

tense: verb stem +

ending

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 present, 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
-abas
-abamos
-aban

Consider the verbs *hablar* and *estudiar*:

(I used to speak, you used to speak, etc.) hablaba hablaba hablabas hablabas hablábamos hablábamos hablaban hablaban	(I used to study, you used to study, etc.) estudiaba estudiaba estudiabas estudiabas estudiábamos estudiábamos estudiaban estudiaban
--	--

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

-ía
-ías
-íamos
-ían

Consider the verbs *comer* and *vivir*:

(I used to eat, you used to eat, etc.) comía comía comías comías comíamos comíamos comían comían	(I used to live, you used to live, etc.) vivía vivía vivías vivías vivíamos vivíamos vivían vivían
--	--

Irregular Verbs in the Imperfect

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

ser	ir	ver
(I used to be, etc.) era era eras eras éramos éramos eran eran	(I used to go, etc.) iba iba ibas ibas íbamos íbamos iban iban	(I used to see, etc.) veía veía veías veías veíamos veíamos veían 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 11-2-2

¿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 _____

antropóloga	payaso	filósofo
explorador	pianista	psiquiatra
escritor	bailarines	policia
pintor	Presidente	arquitecto

ejercicio II-2-3

1. My father was a farmer (*granjero*). _____
2. Mary had a little lamb (*condorito*). _____
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 **11-2-4**

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:

No esperaba el bus. *I waited/was waiting for the bus.*
 No creamos el cuento. *We didn't believe the story.*

Estabas cansado. *You were tired.*
 Querías 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.*

Hacia 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 (e → ie)	to regret, feel sorry
llevarse bien con	to get along with	sentirse (e → ie)	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?

They didn't believe me. _____

My family loved me a lot. _____

We were very sad for a long time. _____

He hated his new boss. _____

I liked the photo of your family. _____

I liked the flowers in their garden. _____

Even though he bothered me, I loved him. _____

She worried about you a lot. _____

Were you thinking about me? _____

What were you thinking about? _____

How did you feel during the trial (*el juicio*)? _____

He didn't get along with his mother-in-law (*la suegra*). _____

"Would" and "could" in the past: The words "would" and "could" are unusual with regard to tenses because they are markers for both the imperfect and the conditional tenses in English, and thus often present problems when shifting to another language. Consider the following sentences:

I would go to the movies but I don't have time.

I would go to the movies every weekend as a child. (I used to go to the movies. . . .)

The first sentence is in the conditional, because it refers to an action that *would* take place if a certain condition were met, namely, my having more time. The second sentence is in the imperfect, as it refers to an action that took place many times in the past. In the imperfect, "would" is the equivalent of "used to."

The same holds true for "could." Consider the following sentences:

I'm so hungry, I could eat three hamburgers.

When I was younger, I could eat three hamburgers without gaining weight.

The first sentence is conditional because it refers to an uncompleted action. The second, however, refers to what the person *used to be able to do*. In the imperfect, "could" is equivalent to "was/were able to."

examples:

Quando yo era joven, **jugaba** al béisbol cada fin de semana.
When I was young, *I would play* baseball every weekend.

Quando yo vivía en Florida, **podía** nadar todo el año.
 When I lived in Florida, I *could* swim all year long.
 Juan **no estudiaba** porque no le gustaba la clase.
 John *wouldn't study* because he didn't like the class.

1. As a child, John would watch TV every day after school. _____

2. When we lived in France, we would drink wine with every meal. _____

3. Last year they couldn't speak Spanish. _____

4. Why couldn't you go with me? _____

5. When I was young I would look under the bed every night before turning out (*apagar*) the light. _____

6. Lou Gehrig could play baseball better than Ty Cobb. _____

7. When Jane worked (used to work) at the bank, she would drink fifteen cups (*lazzas*) of coffee every day. _____

8. When you (*sing. form.*) were younger, you could remember the capitals of every state. _____

9. When Robert worked for the CIA, he would never tell anybody his real name. _____

10. They couldn't vote because they didn't have identification. _____

11. You were never home. Where would you go those nights? _____

12. We couldn't call you because the telephone wouldn't work. _____

13. For every party that we had, Mary would bring French fries and I would bring ketchup.

14. The bread was moldy (*mohoso*). I couldn't eat it.

15. As a girl, Vicky would have to make her bed every morning before leaving for school.

Key words and phrases: Certain words or phrases, when used to describe frequency of a past action, imply repetitive, uncounted occurrences of that action. When one of these words or phrases appears in a sentence describing an ongoing past action, you will use the imperfect tense. Several of these words and phrases are listed below:

a menudo	often	nunca	never
a veces	at times; sometimes	por un rato	for a while
cada día (año, etc.)	every day (year, etc.)	siempre	always
con frecuencia	frequently; often	tantas veces	so many times
cuando	whenever	toda la vida	all one's life
de vez en cuando	from time to time	todo el día	all day long
frecuentemente	frequently	todo el tiempo	all the time
muchas veces	many times	varias veces	various/several times

ejercicio II-2-7

1. I always studied before a test.

2. He frequently called me after 10:00 p.m.

3. All my life I wanted to have a piano.

4. They always cheated (*engañar*) us whenever we played cards.

5. You ate there frequently.

6. You (*pl. fam.*) often wrote long letters.

7. From time to time we sent money to the organization.

8. Sometimes he didn't earn as much money as his wife.

Fill in the blanks with the appropriate *preterite* or *imperfect* form of the verb. Look for the "markers," i.e., *anoche* (last night) will set up the preterite, while *con frecuencia* (frequently) will set up the imperfect.

ejercicio **II-2-8**

1. Yo (hablar) _____ con Jorge esta mañana.
2. De niño, Felipe (vivir) _____ en México.
3. Anoche, Marcos (comer) _____ tres tacos.
4. De niño, Marcos (comer) _____ tacos cada noche.
5. Ayer, nosotros (ir) _____ al cine.
6. Yo (comprar) _____ esta camisa en Macy's.
7. Nosotros (llegar) _____ aquí a las dos de la tarde.
8. Juanita (llegar) _____ a la una.
9. María siempre (estudiar) _____ en la cocina.

10. He always sent a thank-you note after receiving a gift. _____
11. She never bought anything without a coupon (*el cupón*). _____
12. He frequently lied to us, but we never said anything to him. _____
13. I always wondered (*preguntarse*) why she washed her hands so many times every day. _____
14. She was never happy. She complained every day, all day long. _____
15. At times we read, and at times we wrote. _____

10. Ayer María (estudiar) _____ por una hora.
11. A veces los señores Molino (comer) _____ en el patio.
12. El jueves pasado, los Yankees (jugar) _____ al beisbol contra los Twins.
13. Mi tío siempre (ser) _____ más alto que yo.
14. Tú nunca (ser) _____ tan alto como yo.
15. Ellos (ir) _____ al cine tres veces el fin de semana pasado.

Clock time and age in the past: When referring to the time of day or one's age in the past, *always* use the imperfect. There are only two verbs involved here: *ser* (for clock time) and *tener* (for age). Note that references to time and age often are made with regard to other actions, and that these actions often (but not always) are in the preterite.

examples:

<p>Era la una cuando llegué. It was one o'clock when I arrived. imperfect preterite</p>	<p>Yo tenía diez años cuando conocí a Juan. I was ten years old when I met John. imperfect preterite</p>
<p>Eran las siete y media cuando me desperté. It was seven-thirty when I woke up. imperfect preterite</p>	<p>No conocía a Juan cuando tenía ocho años. I didn't know John when I was eight. imperfect imperfect</p>

ejercicio

II-2-9

1. It was two-thirty when you called me. _____
2. Mary was twenty-two when she bought her first car. _____
3. It was quarter after four when I found the money. _____
4. They were eighteen years old when they graduated from high school. _____
5. It was five to five when the tree fell down. _____
6. We worked hard when we were fifteen. _____
7. When I got up, it was six-fifteen. _____
8. I learned how to ride a bike when I was six years old. _____

6. ¿Qué hora era cuando volviste a tu casa anoche?

5. ¿Qué hora era cuando saliste de tu casa esta mañana?

4. ¿Cuántos años tenías cuando aprendiste a montar en bicicleta?

3. ¿Cuántos años tenías cuando comenzaste la escuela?

2. ¿Qué hora era cuando te levantaste esta mañana?

1. ¿Qué hora era cuando te acostaste anoche?

¡Te toca a ti!
Responde a las siguientes preguntas con frases completas:

15. How old was John when he got married (casarse)?

14. What time was it when you finished the book?

13. Where did you live when you were fourteen years old?

12. It was three o'clock in the morning when they left.

11. We didn't know that it was twelve-thirty.

10. She had a baby when she was forty.

9. It was quarter to four when the telephone rang.

7. ¿Cuántos años tenías cuando comenzaste a estudiar español? _____

8. ¿Cuántos años tenías cuando aprendiste a nadar? _____

Habia—the past of hay: Just as *hay* in the present is both singular and plural (there is, there are), its imperfect form, *había* (from the verb *haber*), means both *there was* and *there were*. *Había* is used to express existence, *not* action.

examples:

Había leche en el refrigerador. *There was* milk in the refrigerator.
 No había dinero en el banco. *There wasn't any* money in the bank.
 Había tres hombres y un bebé en la película. *There were* three men and a baby in the movie.
 No había hojas en el árbol. *There weren't any* leaves on the tree.

ejercicio II-2-10

1. There was a spider under my bed this morning. _____

2. There were twenty people at the party. _____

3. There was a fly in my soup. _____

4. There were one hundred questions on the test. _____

5. There was a lot of noise during the storm. _____

6. There were five hundred pages in the book. _____

7. There wasn't any gasoline in the tank. (Any does not translate here.) _____

8. There weren't any leaves on the tree. _____

9. There wasn't enough time for questions. _____

10. There were more women than men at the meeting. _____

11. There was garbage (*la basura*) on the table. _____

12. There was so much fog (*la niebla*) that I couldn't drive. _____

13. In January there wasn't anybody outside. _____

14. In the summer there were lots of people in the streets.

15. There weren't any women in that restaurant.

traducción H-2-II

When I was young, there was an exhibit of insects at the zoo every summer. My family and I always went. There was a building just for butterflies, and there were ten kinds of butterflies flying around. There was also a building that had dozens of insects. I never knew that there were so many insects. There was information everywhere. I read that for every pound of humans, there are twelve pounds of insects. I also learned that Little Miss Muffet really existed. Her father, Thomas Muffet, was an entomologist who gave his daughter mashed spiders when she was sick. This was a common remedy for colds 200 years ago!

vocabulario

building	el edificio	flying around	volando de un lado a otro
butterfly	la mariposa	human (being)	el ser humano
cold	el resfriado	just	sólo
dozen	la docena	mashed spiders	puré de arañas
entomologist	el entomólogo	pound	la libra
exhibit	la exposición	really	verdaderamente

"Going to" do something in the past: The expression of intent, *ir + a + infinitive*, e.g., "Voy a comprar un carro" (*I am going to buy a car*) is a mental expression: there is no physical action taking place. Such sentences in the past, therefore, will be in the imperfect.

Ibamos a comer.
 We were going to eat.
Ibais a darme dinero.
 You were going to give me money.
Eillos iban a contar las ovejas.
 They were going to count the sheep.

Yo iba a comprar un carro.
 I was going to buy a car.
?Ibas a llamarme?
 Were you going to call me?
El iba a cantar.
 He was going to sing.

ejercicio II-2-12

1. I was going to eat. _____

2. Were you going to tell me something? _____

3. He was going to wear his white shirt but it was dirty. _____

4. We were going to shovel (quitar) the snow. _____

5. They were going to spend the day in the country but it was bad weather out. _____

6. When were you (pl. form.) going to sit down? _____

7. I was going to go to bed at ten-thirty but there was a good program on television. _____

8. How were you going to do this? _____

9. Why was she going to build a house in the woods? _____

Who was going to fix this faucet (el grifo)? _____

We were going to brush our teeth but there wasn't any toothpaste (la pasta de dientes). _____

I was going to give him money for his birthday. _____

Where were you (pl. fam.) going to send this package? _____

14. When were you going to bring us the flowers?

15. Why wasn't he going to fill the glasses with water?

Progressive mood in the past: There are two ways to show *-ing* in the past in Spanish (and you may use whichever you wish): one is simply to use the imperfect tense (see "ing" in the past on page 106), or you can use *estar* in the imperfect + present participle. The structure of the latter is identical to that covered in Unit 12 of the Present Tense, **The Present Progressive**; however, in the past *estar* will be in the imperfect.

examples:

Yo estaba hablando.

I was speaking.

Estabas leyendo un libro.

You were reading a book.

Estabais arreglando (reparando) el coche.

You were fixing the car.

Ellos estaban cepillándose los dientes.

They were brushing their teeth.

?Qué estabas haciendo anoche?

Escribe una X delante de las cosas que hiciste.

1. Yo estaba estudiando español.

2. Yo estaba jugando a los naipes.

3. Yo estaba duchándome.

4. Yo estaba escribiendo una carta.

5. Yo estaba pagando las cuentas.

6. Yo estaba limpiando la casa.

7. Yo estaba cocinando.

8. Yo estaba contando el dinero.

9. Yo estaba durmiendo.

10. Yo estaba pensando en mis amigos.

11. Yo estaba sirviendo una comida especial a mi familia.

12. Yo estaba escuchando la radio.

ejercicio II-2-13

1. I was eating. _____

2. You were studying. _____

3. Dumbo was flying. _____

4. She was eating lunch. _____

5. We were drinking milk. _____

6. You (*pl fam*) were telling the truth. _____

7. They were going to bed. _____

8. You (*pl form*) were brushing your hair. _____

9. I was taking a bath. _____

10. John was shaving. _____

11. Mary was playing the piano. _____

12. Mary was playing tennis. _____

traducción II-2-14

(Preterite and imperfect mix)

I watched "The People's Court" this afternoon while I was eating lunch. I love that show. There was a woman—who was not happy—who was suing the owners of a pet store because she bought a puppy, took it home, didn't train it, and after a few weeks the puppy began to chew and destroy the furniture. This woman wanted a reimbursement for the cost of the dog, its food, shots, even for its toys! The owners seemed normal. This woman seemed to be nuts. The judge was probably thinking the same thing because she lost the case. Afterwards, she told the announcer that she was going to put the dog to sleep. After some commercials, the announcer told his faithful viewers that he bought the dog and named it P.C. (for People's Court).

