

The Preterite Tense

TENSE: Preterite

TIME: Refers to specific, completed past actions

KEY PHRASES: Certain

time (last night, yesterday at 4:00, last

July 4th); certain

number of times

STRUCTURE: Simple

tense: verb base +

ending

The preterite tense allows you to refer to specific past actions performed (1) at a fixed point in time, (2) a specific number of times, or (3) during an enclosed amount of time. The key is the quantitative nature of the action. If the action is in the past and you can pin-point it as to when or how many times it occurred, you will use the preterite tense. It is as though there were a frame or box around the action. Consider the following sentences:

Fixed point in time:

I called you at 3:00.

He bought the car on Tuesday afternoon.

We saw the movie last night.

Specific number of actions:

I called you five times.

They ate ten sandwiches.

She read the book twice.

Enclosed amount of time:

I worked for eight hours.

The movie lasted two and a half hours.

He lived there for two years.

In each of the preceding sentences, the action's time is specific, measured in some way, either by the clock, the calendar, or number of times the action occurred.

It is important to remember that while an obvious feature of the preterite tense is how it quantifies action, we do not always state the quantity of our actions. When the quantity is not stated, it is generally implied. Consider these sentences:

1. *I went to John's party.*

2. *We ate at McDonald's.*

3. *The meeting was boring.*

In the first two sentences, the implication is that the person performed the action *once*. In the third, the implication is that the *entire* meeting, from beginning to end, was boring. A good test for determining if a sentence is in the preterite is to consider if it is reasonable to ask "For how long?" or "When?" the action took place. For example, if someone tells you, "John called me," you can reasonably ask, "When?" and expect a specific answer. But if this person says, "John used to call me several times a day," you probably would be wasting your time if you asked *when*. In other words, "John called me" is in the preterite, while "John used to call me several times a day" is not (this latter sentence is in the imperfect tense, which will be discussed in the next unit).

Regular Verbs in the Preterite

To form regular verbs in the preterite you do the following:

-ar verbs: drop the -ar and add the following endings:	
yo hablé nosotros hablamos tú hablaste vosotros hablasteis él habló ellos hablaron (I spoke, you spoke, etc.)	-é -aste -aron

Note that the *nosotros* form is identical in the preterite and the present tenses for -ar verbs.

examples:

Yo hablé. I spoke.
 Tú miraste la película. You watched the movie.
 Ella me llamó tres veces. She called me three times.
 Hablamos con Juan. We spoke with John.
 Vosotros comprasteis palomitas. You bought popcorn.
 Ellos contaron el dinero. They counted the money.

-er and -ir verbs: drop the -er or -ir and add the following endings:	
yo abrí nosotros abrimos tú abriste vosotros abristeis él abrió ellos abrieron (I opened, you opened, etc.)	-í -iste -ieron yo comí nosotros comimos tú comiste vosotros comisteis él comió ellos comieron (I ate, you ate, etc.)

Note: Most stem-changing verbs change only in the present tense (*not* in the preterite), e.g., *contar* (to count): *yo cuento* (I count); *yo conté* (I counted). The exceptions to this are -ir stem-changing verbs, and are discussed under **irregular verbs**, on page 88.

examples:

Escribí una carta. I wrote a letter.
 Comimos pizza. We ate pizza.

Vendiste tu casa.
You sold your house.

Rompisteis las ventanas.
You broke the windows.

Ellos abrieron las cajas.
They opened the boxes.

Ella bebió tres vasos de leche.
She drank three glasses of milk.

Before working with the preterite, it is important to be familiar with the more common preterite "markers," or words and phrases that indicate specific time frames. Several are listed below.

ayer	yesterday	la semana pasada	last week
anoche	last night	el mes (año) pasado	last month (year)
esta mañana	this morning	hace _____	ago _____
esta tarde	this afternoon	ayer por la mañana/tarde	yesterday morning/afternoon

Para ti, ¿cual es verdadero o falso?

1. Hable por telefono ayer por la tarde. _____
2. Comi una ensalada anoche. _____
3. Abri las ventanas en mi casa hace dos horas. _____
4. Miré la television anoche. _____
5. Bebi jugo de naranja esta mañana. _____
6. Asisti a la escuela la semana pasada. _____
7. Compré un coche el año pasado. _____
8. Vendí mi casa el mes pasado. _____

ejercicio

II-1-1

1. I bought a shirt yesterday. _____
2. You studied last night. _____
3. She worked for two hours. _____
4. We washed the dishes. _____
5. They sang five songs. _____
6. I ran to the corner. _____
7. You wrote a letter. _____
8. She opened the door. _____
9. We didn't open those windows. _____

10. They sold the car. _____
11. We danced the tango last night. _____
12. They spoke with the owner. _____
13. I took a shower this morning. _____
14. You washed your hair. _____
15. They went to bed at eleven-thirty. _____

!Te toca a ti!

Responde, con frases completas, a las siguientes preguntas:

1. ¿Hablaste por teléfono anoche? _____
2. ¿Dónde te compraste la camisa? _____
3. ¿Qué comiste anoche? _____
4. ¿Qué recibiste para tu último cumpleaños? _____
5. ¿Escuchaste la radio hoy? _____
6. ¿Tomaste café ayer por la mañana? _____
7. ¿Bailaste el fin de semana pasado? _____
8. ¿Estudiaste español el año pasado? _____

Orthographic Changes in Regular Verbs

There are three standard orthographic (spelling) changes in Spanish which affect verbs in the preterite as well as in other tenses. In the preterite, these changes occur only in the first person singular *yo* form. They are as follows:

1. verbs ending in **-gar**: insert a **n** before the **e**: **yo llegué** (I arrived)
2. verbs ending in **-car**: the **c** changes to **qu** before the letter **e**: **yo practiqué** (I practiced)
3. verbs ending in **-zar**: the **z** changes to **c** before the letter **e**: **yo empecé** (I began)

The reason for the first two changes is phonetic: in order to retain the original hard **g** and **c** sounds, the letter **n** is inserted (the letters **g** and **c** are soft before the vowels **e** and **i**). In the last change it is because the letter **z** *never* directly precedes the letter **e** in Spanish (except in rare cases when **ze** are the first two letters of a word).

Some frequently used verbs in these categories, with the preterite *yo* form:

llegar	to arrive	yo llegué
jugar	to play (a game)	yo jugué

ejercicio II-1-2

1. I practiced the piano for an hour. _____
2. I arrived at two o'clock. _____
3. I organized the party. _____
4. I began to dance on the table. _____
5. I played the guitar for two hours at the reception. _____
6. I played tennis with the pro (*el jugador profesional*). _____
7. I took twenty pictures of my cat. _____
8. I authorized the purchase. _____
9. I classified the information. _____

Remember: Only verbs in the *yo* form are affected by these orthographic changes.

autorizar	to authorize	<i>yo autorice</i>
comenzar	to commence, begin	<i>yo comence</i>
empezar	to begin	<i>yo empece</i>
organizar	to organize	<i>yo organice</i>
rezar	to pray	<i>yo rezce</i>
simbolizar	to symbolize	<i>yo simbolicce</i>
trazar	to trace	<i>yo trace</i>
tropczarse (con)	to bump (into)	<i>yo me tropece</i>
aparcar	to park	<i>yo aparque</i>
buscar	to look for, search	<i>yo busque</i>
clarificar	to clarify	<i>yo clarifique</i>
clasificar	to classify	<i>yo clasifique</i>
destacar	to stand out	<i>yo destaque</i>
empacar	to pack	<i>yo empaque</i>
justificar	to justify	<i>yo justifique</i>
practicar	to practice	<i>yo practique</i>
sacar	to take out, take a picture	<i>yo saque</i>
tocar	to touch, play (an instrument)	<i>yo toque</i>
pagar	to pay (for)	<i>yo pague</i>
regar	to water (a plant)	<i>yo regue</i>
segar	to mow (grass, etc.)	<i>yo segue</i>
tagar	to swallow	<i>yo trague</i>
vagar	to wander	<i>yo vague</i>

10. I bumped into your house's step (*el peldaño*). _____
11. I parked the car in a prohibited space. _____
12. I never stood out in English for my pronunciation. _____
13. I swallowed the medicine without thinking. _____
14. I paid the gas bill. _____
15. I watered my friend Lola's plants. _____
- Final note:* While these three types of verbs do not exactly follow the regular pattern of forming the preterite tense, they are still considered regular verbs in the preterite because these changes occur at *all* times in *all* tenses.

Irregular Verbs in the Preterite

There are several irregular verbs in the preterite. While patterns do emerge and the endings are similar, it is important to understand the various types of conjugations.

The following eleven verbs all take this set of endings:

-e	-iste	-o
-imos	-istis	-ieron

1. andar to walk	andar-	anduv-	anduve; anduviste; anduvo . . .
2. estar to be	estuv-	estuv-	estuve; estuviste; estubo . . .
3. tener to have	tuv-	tuv-	tuve; tuviste; tuvo . . .
4. caber to fit	cup-	cup-	cupe; cupiste; cupo . . .
5. haber auxiliary, to have	hub-	hub-	hube; hubiste; hubo . . .
6. poder to be able to	pod-	pod-	pude; pudiste; pudo . . .
7. poner to put, place	pus-	pus-	pusé; pusiste; puso . . .
8. saber to know	sab-	sab-	sabí; sabiste; supo . . .
9. hacer to make, do	hic-	hic-	hice; hiciste; hizo . . .
10. querer to want	quis-	quis-	quise; quisiste; quiso . . .
11. venir to come	vin-	vin-	vine; viniste; vino . . .

Note:

- Verbs 1–3 take the letter *uv* in the new stem; 4–8 take a *u*; and 9–11 take an *i*.
- The only exception above is the third person singular of *hacer*, which is *hizo*. (The *c* changes to *z* to avoid the *k* sound.)
- There are no accent marks on these irregular endings.
- For their full conjugations, consult the preterite verb chart in the appendix.

Para ti, ¿cuál es verdadero o falso?

- 1. Tive una fiesta hace dos semanas.
- 2. Anduve a la escuela esta mañana.
- 3. Anoche no pude dormir.
- 4. No hice nada ayer.
- 5. Alguien vino a mi casa el fin de semana pasado.
- 6. Puse los zapatos en el armario anoche.
- 7. Estuve increíblemente enfermo/a ayer.
- 8. Anduve al cine esta semana.

ejercicio II-1-3

- 1. I walked to the store.
- 2. He came to my party.
- 3. Last night I couldn't sleep.
- 4. They had an accident last Tuesday.
- 5. We made the beds this morning.
- 6. When did you know (find out) the answer?
- 7. You (*pl. fam.*) were here for no more than ten minutes.
- 8. I put the clothes in the closet.
- 9. What did you do last night?
- 10. They had to work for ten hours yesterday.
- 11. I put on my shoes.
- 12. We were there for half an hour.
- 13. Who made these invitations?
- 14. She didn't come to the meeting because she had an accident.

¡Te toca a ti! ¿Qué hiciste ayer? List ten things that you did yesterday:

15. I was in the store for twenty minutes and then I came here. _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Ser and ir: The preterite conjugations for *ser* and *ir* are identical. But don't worry, because the context will carry the desired meaning, and *ser* is used less often than *ir* in the preterite.

ser	fui fuiste fue fuimos fuisteis fueron <i>(I was, you were, etc.)</i>
ir	fui fuiste fue fuimos fuisteis fueron <i>(I went, you went, etc.)</i>

ejercicio

II-1-4

1. I went to the game. _____
2. I was president of the club for one year. _____
3. He went to the store (in order) to buy eggs. _____
4. Why did you go away? _____

5. They didn't go yesterday because they went last week. _____

6. We didn't go to the wedding. _____

7. Did you (*pl. fam.*) go to school today? _____

8. Who was the big winner yesterday? _____

9. The party was terrible. _____

10. The meeting was/went well. _____

11. Anita and Pepe were boyfriend/girlfriend (*novios*) for two years, but they never went to Venice. _____

12. He was my best friend for ten years. _____

13. We went separately (*por separado*) to the same store. _____

14. Where did you (*pl. form.*) go last night? _____

15. How was the party? _____ It was a disaster!

Decir and traer: The verbs *decir* (to say, tell) and *traer* (to bring) are conjugated as follows:

decir	(I said/told, you said/told, etc.) dije dijiste dijisteis dijeron
traer	(I brought, you brought, etc.) traje trajiste trajisteis trajeron

Verbs related to, and conjugated in the same manner as *traer*:

atraer	to attract	(atraje, etc.)
distraer	to distract	(distraje, etc.)
retraer	to bring back, dissuade	(retraje, etc.)
sustraer	to remove, take away	(sustraje, etc.)

ejercicio II-1-5

1. I told the children my name. _____

2. You told me a lie. _____

3. He brought wine to the party. _____

4. He said that he spoke with Carlos last week. _____

5. We said that we didn't eat the cookies. _____

6. The television distracted me. _____

7. What did you (*pl. form.*) say to Mary? _____

8. What did you tell her? _____

9. His manners attracted me. _____

10. What did he say when you told him that you wrote the letter? _____

11. I didn't tell them anything. _____

12. What did you bring us? _____

13. They didn't tell me the truth. _____

14. Did he tell you what he told me yesterday? _____

15. The sugar attracted the flies. _____

Dar and ver: The verbs *dar* and *ver* are very similar in their preterite conjugations and thus are easy to learn together. While *dar* is clearly irregular, *ver* is irregular only in that the accent marks on the first and third person singular are omitted. Their conjugations are as follows:

dar	ver
<i>(I gave, you gave, etc.)</i> di diste dio dimos disteis dieron	<i>(I saw, you saw, etc.)</i> vi viste vio vimos visteis vieron

ejercicio II-1-6

1. I gave John a package yesterday. _____

2. I saw John yesterday. _____

vocabulario	
alasi	!ay!
bathing suit	el traje de baño
beach	la playa
bird	el pájaro
fun	la diversión
inch	la pulgada
(the) next day	al día siguiente
	travel agent
	(to) take out
	(to) snow
	sand
	(to) relax
	rain forest
	(to) offer
	ofrecer
	la selva tropical
	relajarse
	la arena
	nevar
	sacar
	el/la agente de viajes

I went to Puerto Rico last January. It was wonderful! A friend of mine is a travel agent, and when she offered me the opportunity to go to the Caribbean for a week of sun and fun—for very little money—I said to her, “When do we go?” The day that we left it snowed six inches here. When we arrived in San Juan, sun, heat, and sand greeted us. We took a taxi to our hotel, I took my bathing suit out of my suitcase and we went to the beach. The next day we went to El Yunque, the rain forest, where we walked for hours and saw many beautiful birds and trees. I couldn’t believe it—it was so beautiful! The next day we went to Luquillo Beach and swam and read and relaxed. We did this every day until—alasi—we had to return to reality.

traducción II-1-7

10. I didn't see the present that they gave us. _____
9. Did you see the cat that Miguel gave me? _____
8. You (*pl. form.*) didn't give us anything. _____
7. When they saw me, they gave me the money. _____
6. Which (What) movie did you (*pl. fam.*) see last night? _____
5. What did you give him for his birthday? _____
4. She saw us at the movies. _____
3. She gave me a book. _____

-Ir stem-changing verbs: As mentioned earlier, most stem-changing verbs change only in the present. However, *-ir* stem-changing verbs make small changes in the preterite. There are three kinds of *-ir* stem-changing verbs in the present tense, and they make the following changes in the preterite, but *only* in the third person singular and plural.

In *o* → *ue* verbs in the present, the *o* changes to *u* in the preterite:

dormir (to sleep)	dormí dormiste dormisteis dormimos	durmió durmiste durmisteis durmieron
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In *e* → *ie* verbs in the present, the *e* changes to *i* in the preterite:

mentir (to lie)	mentí mentiste mentisteis mentimos	mintió mintiste mintisteis mintieron
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In *e* → *i* verbs in the present, the *e* changes to *i* in the preterite:

pedir (to request, ask for)	(I requested, you requested, etc.) pedí pediste pedisteis pedimos	pidió pidiste pidisteis pidieron
------------------------------------	---	--

Verbs in these categories:

- o** → *ue* verbs in the present: **dormir** to sleep **morir** to die
- e** → *ie* verbs in the present: **advertir** to advise, warn **mentir** to lie
- e** → *i* verbs in the present: **preferir** to prefer **sentirse** (se) to feel
- e** → *i* verbs in the present: **medir** to measure, be long **pedir** to request, ask for
- e** → *i* verbs in the present: **repetir** to repeat **seguir** to follow, continue
- e** → *i* verbs in the present: **servir** to serve

1. She slept for ten hours. _____

2. They lied to me. _____

3. He requested more coffee. _____

4. The cockroaches died. _____

5. Our lawyer warned us of the danger (*el peligro*). _____

6. At that moment she preferred not to say anything. _____

7. Did they advise you of your rights? _____

8. Dorothy followed the yellow brick (*de ladrillos*) road. _____

9. They repeated the question twice. _____

10. He asked for a raise. _____

Verbs that change *i* → *y* in the preterite: In those *-er* and *-ir* verbs in which a vowel immediately precedes the infinitive ending, the third person singular and plural change from *i* to *y*. In all other forms there is a written accent over the letter *i*:

creer (to believe)	<i>(I believed, you believed, etc.)</i>
	creí
	creíste
	creímos
	creísteis
	creyeron

Verbs in this category:

caer	to fall	cayó	ellos
caer(se)	to fall down	se cayó	
creer	to believe	creyó	
leer	to read	leyó	
oir	to hear	oyó	
poseer	to possess	poseyó	
prover	to provide	proveyó	
caer	to fall	cayeron	
caer(se)	to fall down	se cayeron	
creer	to believe	creyeron	
leer	to read	leyeron	
oir	to hear	oyeron	
poseer	to possess	poseyeron	
prover	to provide	proveyeron	

exceptions:

1. The verb *traer* (and its compound verbs *traer* and *distraer*): see page 91 for their conjugations.
2. Verbs ending in *-guir* (e.g., *seguir*): the *n* is not pronounced.
3. Verbs ending in *-uir* (e.g., *destruir*) make the change from *í* → *y*; however, the written accent over the *i* appears only in the first person singular form. See as follows:

destruir (to destroy)	<i>(I destroyed, you destroyed, etc.)</i> destruí destruiste destruisteis destruyeron
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Verbs in this category:

ellos	él		
construyeron	construyó	to build, construct	construir
contribuyeron	contribuyó	to contribute	contribuir
destruyeron	destruyó	to destroy	destruir
fluyeron	fluyó	to flow, run	fluir
huyeron	huyó	to flee, run away	huir
incluyeron	incluyó	to include	incluir
influyeron	influyó	to influence	influir

ejercicio

II-1-9

1. John didn't hear me. _____
2. They read my book twice. _____
3. The trees fell down during the storm. _____
4. Romeo and Juliet ran away. _____
5. The caterers (*los abastecedores*) didn't provide enough bread. _____
6. The thieves (*los ladrones*) destroyed our house. _____
7. Did you read my newspaper? _____
8. They contributed one hundred fifty dollars last year. _____
9. The dish ran away with the spoon. _____

1. I produced a movie last year. _____
2. You translated the document well. _____
3. We drove to the theater. _____
4. The magician produced a rabbit from the hat. _____
5. You (*pl. fam.*) drove twenty miles. _____

II-1-10 **ejercicio**

conducir	to drive, lead	condujo	ellos
deducir	to deduce, infer	dedujo	condujeron
inducir	to induce, lead	indujo	dedujeron
introducir	to introduce	introdujo	indujeron
producir	to produce	produjo	introdujeron
reducir	to reduce, cut down	redujo	produjeron
traducir	to translate	tradujo	redujeron
			tradujeron

Verbs in this category:

producir (to produce)	produce produce produce <i>(I produced, you produced, etc.)</i>
	produjimos produjiste produjeron

Verbs ending in -ucir: All verbs ending with *-ucir* are conjugated like *producir*.

10. Humpty Dumpty fell down. _____
11. The tears flowed from my eyes. _____
12. The branch fell from the tree. _____
13. They fled from the scene of the crime. _____
14. They constructed an enormous house. _____
15. Why didn't he include us? _____

6. I translated this sentence from English to Spanish. _____

7. We led the boys to the cafeteria. _____

8. They drove us to the wedding. _____

9. How many pages did you translate? _____

10. How far (*hasta donde*) did you drive? _____

11. I deduced the answer. _____

12. The President didn't reduce taxes (*los impuestos*) last year. _____

traducción

II-1-11

H. L. Mencken was a great writer. He was born in Baltimore in 1880, where he lived his entire life, and he died in 1956. He wrote many essays on politics and social issues, but his principal interest, I believe, was language, in particular, the English of the United States. One of his most famous books is *The American Language*, in which Mencken discussed the richness of the United States and how many other languages influenced this language. He also produced a series of autobiographies and diaries. He read all types of literature and possessed a strict personal ethic. He believed that a person should work hard, play hard, and above all, think.

vocabulario

(to be) born	nacer	language (particular)	el idioma
essay	el ensayo	politics	la política
ethic	el credo	richness	la riqueza
issue	la cuestión	type	la clase
language (general)	el lenguaje	writer	el escritor

Verbs that change meaning in the preterite: Because the preterite tense implies that an action occurred either at or over a specific period of time, certain verbs change meaning in this tense. Note that the action of the following verbs is more mental/emotional than physical.

Verbs in this category:

	present	preterite
conocer	to know (a person/place)	to meet
poder	to be able (to do something)	to manage (to do something)
no poder	not to be able (to do something)	to fail (to do something)
querer	to want	to try
no querer	not to want	to refuse
saber	to know (a fact/information)	to find out (learn)
sentir	to feel	to regret, be sorry
tener	to have	to have (at a certain time)

Conocer a Juan hace dos años. I met John two years ago.

Ella pudo encontrarlo. She managed to find it.

No pudimos encontrarlo. We couldn't/find it.

querer salir. I tried to leave/I wanted to leave very badly.

El no quiso comer. He refused to eat.

¿Cuándo lo supiste? When did you find (it) out?

Sentí llamarla. I regretted calling/I was sorry I called her.

Ella tuvo un bebé ayer. She had a baby yesterday.

Para ti, ¿cuál es verdadero o falso?

1. No pude dormir anoche.
2. Conocí a mi mejor amigo/a hace más de cinco años.
3. Tuve un accidente de coche el año pasado.
4. Pude pagar los impuestos el año pasado antes del quince de abril.
5. Lei el periódico esta mañana y supe mucho de los dilemas políticos.
6. En mi cumpleaños pasado no quise comer nada.
7. Una amiga mía tuvo un bebé este año.
8. Mis padres se conocieron en una cita a ciegas (*blind date*).

9. Muchos políticos no pudieron cumplir la palabra este año.
10. Mi mejor amigo/a tuvo una fiesta en su casa el sábado pasado.

ejercicio II-1-12

1. I met Phillip a year and a half ago (*hace un año y medio*).

2. He failed to see my point of view.

3. They didn't find (it) out until yesterday.

4. My sister had a baby last May.

5. Why did you (*pl. fam.*) refuse to leave?

6. He regretted winning the money.

7. She tried to leave but couldn't (failed to) find her keys.

8. I managed to pay the bills on time this month.

9. We met each other on an elevator.

10. When I found out that Juana managed to forge (*falsificar*) my signature, I couldn't think.