Preterite or Imperfect

Spanish · British English › Spanish

Name: _____ Date: _____ Score: _____ / _____

Take this test online and practise in the Palabrify app
palabrify.com/spanish/grammar/a2/preterite-or-imperfect

Using the Spanish Past Tenses: Indefinido vs. Imperfecto

In Spanish, when we talk about the past, we mainly use two tenses: the **Pretérito Indefinido** (often called the simple past or preterite) and the **Pretérito Imperfecto** (the imperfect past). Deciding which one to use can be a bit tricky, but this guide will help you understand the differences!

Both tenses describe events in the past, but they each have specific uses. Think of it like telling a story: the Indefinido covers the main plot points, while the Imperfecto sets the scene and describes the ongoing background.

Pretérito Indefinido: What Happened?

We use the **Indefinido** to talk about actions that were **completed** at a specific point in the past. It's like a snapshot of a single, finished event.

- **Single, completed actions:** “Ayer comí pizza.” (Yesterday I ate pizza.)
- **Actions with a definite beginning and end:** “Viví en Madrid dos años.” (I lived in Madrid for two years – a completed period.)
- **Sequences of events:** “Me levanté, desayuné y salí.” (I got up, had breakfast, and left.)
- **Keywords:** ayer (yesterday), anoche (last night), la semana pasada (last week), el año pasado (last year), en 1999 (in 1999), de repente (suddenly).

Ayer fui al cine con mis amigos.
Yesterday I went to the cinema with my friends.

Pronoun	-AR (hablar)	-ER (comer)	-IR (vivir)
yo	hablé	comí	viví
tú	hablaste	comiste	viviste
él/ella/Ud.	habló	comió	vivió
nosotros/as	hablamos	comimos	vivimos
vosotros/as	hablasteis	comisteis	vivisteis
ellos/ellas/Uds.	hablaron	comieron	vivieron

Pretérito Imperfecto: What Was Happening or How Things Were?

We use the **Imperfecto** to describe **unfinished**, repeated, or ongoing actions in the past, as well as to set the background for other events. It's like describing the scene where the action takes place.

- **Descriptions in the past (people, places, weather):** “La casa era grande.” (The house was big.)
- **Habitual/repeated actions:** “Cuando era niño, jugaba mucho.” (When I was a child, I used to play a lot.)
- **Actions ongoing in the background of another action:** “Mientras leía, sonó el teléfono.” (While I was reading, the phone rang.)
- **Age in the past:** “Tenía veinte años.” (I was twenty years old.)

- **Time in the past:** "Eran las ocho." (It was eight o'clock.)
- **Keywords:** siempre (always), a menudo (often), cada día (every day), mientras (while), antes (before), cuando era niño (when I was a child).

Cuando era niño, jugaba en el parque.
When I was a child, I used to play in the park.

Pronoun	-AR (hablar)	-ER (comer)	-IR (vivir)
yo	hablaba	comía	vivía
tú	hablabas	comías	vivías
él/ella/Ud.	hablaba	comía	vivía
nosotros/as	hablábamos	comíamos	vivíamos
vosotros/as	hablabais	comíais	vivíais
ellos/ellas/Uds.	hablaban	comían	vivían

Memory Tip: The Indefinido tells **what happened** (the plot points), while the Imperfecto tells **what was happening** or **how things were** (the background scene).

Watch out for pitfalls! Some verbs, like *saber* (to know) or *conocer* (to know/to meet), change their meaning depending on the tense! **Sabía** = I knew (a state), **Supe** = I found out (an action). Similarly, **Conocía** = I knew (a person/place), **Conocí** = I met (for the first time).

Ayer **llovió** toda la tarde. (A completed action)
~~Ayer **llovía** toda la tarde. (Incorrect: a completed action with a duration)~~
If we specify a definite duration for an action in the past (e.g., "toda la tarde" – all afternoon) and the action is completed, we use the Indefinido.

Remember, practice makes perfect! The more you use the Indefinido and Imperfecto, the more natural their distinction will become. ¡Mucha suerte!

Part 1 — Choose the correct word

Circle the option that correctly fills each gap.

1. Ayer _____ mis llaves debajo de la mesa.
   Yesterday I found my keys under the table.
   A) encontré B) encontraré C) encontraba D) encuentro

2. La casa _____ muy grande y bonita.
   The house was very big and pretty.
   A) fue B) será C) era D) es

3. Cuando _____ diez años, _____ en Madrid.
   When I was ten years old, I lived in Madrid.
   Gap 1: A) tenía B) tendré C) tuve D) tengo
   Gap 2: A) vivo B) vivía C) viva D) viviré

4. Cuando yo _____, me _____ mi amigo.
   While I was studying, my friend called me.
   Gap 1: A) estudiaba B) estudie C) estudiaré D) estudio
   Gap 2: A) llamaron B) llamará C) llamó D) llama

5. Ayer _____ ocho horas.
   Yesterday I slept for eight hours.
   A) duermo B) dormía C) dormí D) dormiré

6. Ella _____ un vestido nuevo ayer.
   She bought a new dress yesterday.
   A) compra B) compró C) comprará D) compraba

7. Antes la tienda siempre _____ abierta hasta las diez.
   The shop always used to be open until ten.
   A) estaba B) está C) estuvo D) estará

8. El verano pasado _____ un mes en la playa.
   Last summer we spent a month on the beach.
   A) pasaríamos B) pasábamos C) pasaremos D) pasamos

Part 2 — Fill in the gap

Write the missing word or phrase on the line.

1. _____ el libro en la mesa y salí.
   I put the book on the table and left.

2. Siempre _____ la televisión después de cenar.
   I always watched television after dinner.

3. Ayer _____ ocho horas.
   Yesterday I slept for eight hours.

4. El año pasado me _____ un regalo para mi cumpleaños.
   Last year he gave me a present for my birthday.

5. El mes pasado _____ a Barcelona.
   Last month I travelled to Barcelona.

6. Antes _____ la radio por la mañana.
   We used to listen to the radio in the morning.

Part 3 — Put the verbs in the right form

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets on each line.

1. Justo _____ (pensar) en ti cuando me _____ (llamar).
   I was just thinking of you when you called.

2. Mientras _____ (leer) un libro, _____ (sonar) el teléfono.
   While I was reading a book, the phone rang.

3. Cuando yo _____ (estudiar), me _____ (llamar) mi amigo.
   While I was studying, my friend called me.

Part 4 — Translate

Write each word in Spanish on the line.

1. to wake up › _____

2. to study › _____
3. to play › _____
4. to do › _____
5. to order › _____
6. a long time ago › _____

Part 5 — Match the pairs

Write the letter of the matching translation next to each term.

	Term		Translation
1.	querer	A	to live
2.	parecer	B	to write
3.	preferir	C	to want
4.	nacer	D	to be born
5.	entrar	E	to enter
6.	escribir	F	to start
7.	vivir	G	to prefer
8.	empezar	H	to seem

Answer Key

Part 1 — Choose the correct word

1. A) encontré
2. C) era
3. Gap 1: A) tenía; Gap 2: B) vivía
4. Gap 1: A) estudiaba; Gap 2: C) llamó
5. C) dormí
6. B) compró
7. A) estaba
8. D) pasamos

Part 2 — Fill in the gap

1. Puse
2. veía
3. dormí
4. dio
5. viajé
6. escuchábamos

Part 3 — Put the verbs in the right form

1. pensaba; llamaste
2. leía; sonó
3. estudiaba; llamó

Part 4 — Translate

1. despertarse
2. estudiar
3. jugar
4. hacer
5. pedir
6. hace mucho tiempo

Part 5 — Match the pairs

1. C (to want)
2. H (to seem)
3. G (to prefer)
4. D (to be born)
5. E (to enter)
6. B (to write)
7. A (to live)
8. F (to start)