

# Introduction to the Imperfect Past Indicative

There are two main past tenses in Spanish, the Preterite (*pretérito*) and the Imperfect (*copretérito*). Once these tenses are learned, the biggest problem is knowing when to use the Preterite or the Imperfect. They cannot be used interchangeably.

The Preterite portrays events that are over and complete: I drank, I ate, I lived. There is specific closure and the time frame is definable: last night, this morning, yesterday.

The Imperfect refers to past events that are indefinite: I used to drink, I used to live in Texas. There is no specific closure, and the time frames are nebulous: always, before, generally.

The Imperfect is used to portray:

## 1. CONTINUOUS REPEATED ACTION

The Imperfect portrays movement through time in the past, continuous or repeated action, events that *used to occur*. There is no specific beginning or end.

Look at this example: My father *used to* work a lot. In English this sentence can also be stated as:

My father worked a lot.

When you are confused about when to use the Imperfect vs. the Preterite, insert “used to” into the verb form. If “used to” fits, use the Imperfect. If you can insert a Preterite time frame, like last night, use the Preterite.

In the example, My father worked a lot:

My father used to work a lot. = Imperfect  
*Mi padre trabajaba mucho.*

My father worked a lot last night. = Preterite  
*Mi padre trabajó mucho anoche.*

## 2. INTERRUPTED PAST ACTION

The Imperfect also portrays an action that *was going on* and then was interrupted by one or more actions. In these examples, the Imperfect “sets the stage” and the Preterite “comes on top of it”:

I was studying when she arrived. =  
*Yo estaba estudiando cuando ella llegó.*

I was living in Mexico when I met Maria. =  
*Yo estaba viviendo en México cuando conocí a María.*

## 3. SIMULTANEOUS PAST ACTION

When two actions were going on simultaneously, they can be portrayed with the simple Imperfect or the Imperfect Progressive. However, most often, both actions are portrayed with the simple Imperfect:

I sang while she danced, or I was singing while she was dancing. =  
*Yo cantaba mientras ella bailaba.*

## 4. POWER VERBS IN THE PAST

I wanted to leave. = *Yo quería salir.*  
I planned to leave. = *Yo pensaba salir.*

## 5. QUALITIES OR DESCRIPTIONS IN THE PAST

Descriptions in the past using the verb *ser* and *tener* (when used to portray age) usually require the Imperfect:

She was beautiful. = *Ella era hermosa.*  
She was 15 years old. = *Tenía 15 años.*

## 6. THESE VERBS USUALLY USE THE IMPERFECT WHEN PORTRAYING PAST TIME

- **ser** = was = *Ella era hermosa.* = She was beautiful.
- **saber** = knew = *Yo sabía.* = I knew.
- **conocer** = knew (a person) = *Yo conocía a José.* = I knew Jose.
- **querer** = wanted = *Él quería más.* = He wanted more.
- **pensar** + infinitive = planned to or intended = *Yo pensaba salir.* = I planned to leave.
- **necesitar** = needed = *Necesitábamos más tiempo.* = We needed more time.
- **tener** (with age) = had = *Yo tenía veinte años.* = I was twenty years old.

A final word: It is important that you create opportunities to speak. Watch tv in Spanish, or watch movies with Spanish subtitles and read in Spanish. See [www.warrenhardy.com](http://www.warrenhardy.com) - free learning section for intermediate readers.

# IMPERFECT PAST

I used to drink, I was drinking

## REGULAR ENDINGS

-AR		-ER, -IR	
-aba	-ábamos	-ía	-íamos
-abas		-ías	
-aba	-aban	-ía	-ían

## COMMON TRIGGER WORDS

<b>siempre</b> always	<b>generalmente</b> generally
<b>nunca</b> never	<b>todos los días</b> every day
<b>usualmente</b> usually	<b>cuando era joven</b> when (I) was young

## IRREGULARS

### IR - to go

iba	íbamos
ibas	
iba	iban

### SER - to be

era	éramos
eras	
era	eran

**VER - to see:** veía, veías, veía, veíamos, veían

## USES OF THE IMPERFECT

### 1. CONTINUOUS REPEATED PAST ACTION

*Él siempre llegaba tarde.* He always used to arrive late.

### 2. INTERRUPTED PAST ACTION (setting the stage)

*Él estaba estudiando cuando yo llegué.* He was studying when I arrived.

### 3. SIMULTANEOUS PAST ACTION

*Él tocaba mientras ella bailaba.* He played while she danced.

### 4. POWER VERBS IN THE PAST

*Yo quería salir temprano.* I wanted to leave early.

### 5. SER IN THE PAST

*San Miguel era muy hermosa.* San Miguel was very beautiful.

### 6. EMOTIONS AND PHYSICAL CONDITIONS IN THE PAST

*Él siempre estaba enfermo.* He was always sick.

### 7. AGE IN THE PAST

*Yo tenía 20 años cuando salí.* I was twenty years old when I left.

# Imperfect -ar conjugation

-ar endings

-aba	-ábamos
-abas	
-aba	-aban

Conjugate in the Imperfect tense according to the subject. Refer to the diagram above. **answers below**

**1. tomar**

yo tomaba  
 él tomaba  
 José tomaba  
 nosotros tomábamos  
 tú tomabas  
 ellos tomaban

**2. hablar**

ella \_\_\_\_\_  
 ellas \_\_\_\_\_  
 yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 tú \_\_\_\_\_  
 María \_\_\_\_\_  
 Ud. \_\_\_\_\_

**3. cocinar**

él \_\_\_\_\_  
 nosotros \_\_\_\_\_  
 yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 tú y yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 ellos \_\_\_\_\_  
 tú \_\_\_\_\_

**4. trabajar**

yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 él \_\_\_\_\_  
 ellos \_\_\_\_\_  
 Ud. \_\_\_\_\_  
 uds. \_\_\_\_\_  
 ella \_\_\_\_\_

**5. estudiar**

nosotros \_\_\_\_\_  
 ellos \_\_\_\_\_  
 yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 Carlos \_\_\_\_\_  
 ella \_\_\_\_\_  
 tú \_\_\_\_\_

**6. comprar**

yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 ella \_\_\_\_\_  
 él \_\_\_\_\_  
 ellos \_\_\_\_\_  
 Ud. \_\_\_\_\_  
 tú y yo \_\_\_\_\_

**7. invitar**

él \_\_\_\_\_  
 yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 María \_\_\_\_\_  
 ellos \_\_\_\_\_  
 nosotros \_\_\_\_\_  
 tú \_\_\_\_\_

**8. regresar**

él \_\_\_\_\_  
 ellos \_\_\_\_\_  
 yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 Uds. \_\_\_\_\_  
 tú \_\_\_\_\_  
 nosotros \_\_\_\_\_

**9. buscar**

yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 ella \_\_\_\_\_  
 él \_\_\_\_\_  
 ellos \_\_\_\_\_  
 Ud. \_\_\_\_\_  
 tú y yo \_\_\_\_\_

**10. sacar**

nosotros \_\_\_\_\_  
 ellos \_\_\_\_\_  
 yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 Carlos \_\_\_\_\_  
 ella \_\_\_\_\_  
 tú \_\_\_\_\_

**11. tocar**

él \_\_\_\_\_  
 yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 María \_\_\_\_\_  
 ellos \_\_\_\_\_  
 nosotros \_\_\_\_\_  
 tú \_\_\_\_\_

**12. empezar**

él \_\_\_\_\_  
 ellos \_\_\_\_\_  
 yo \_\_\_\_\_  
 Uds. \_\_\_\_\_  
 tú \_\_\_\_\_  
 nosotros \_\_\_\_\_

**A** for exercise above

Disc 1 track 2  
 Cassette 1 side A

**1. TOMAR**

yo tomaba  
 él tomaba  
 José tomaba  
 nosotros tomábamos  
 tú tomabas  
 ellos tomaban

**2. HABLAR**

ella hablaba  
 ellas hablaban  
 yo hablaba  
 tú hablabas  
 María hablaba  
 Ud. hablaba

**3. COCINAR**

él cocinaba  
 nosotros cocinábamos  
 yo cocinaba  
 tú y yo cocinábamos  
 ellos cocinaban  
 tú cocinabas

**4. TRABAJAR**

yo trabajaba  
 él trabajaba  
 ellos trabajaban  
 Ud. trabajaba  
 Uds. trabajaban  
 ella trabajaba

**5. ESTUDIAR**

nosotros estudiábamos  
 ellos estudiaban  
 yo estudiaba  
 Carlos estudiaba  
 ella estudiaba  
 tú estudiabas

**6. COMPRAR**

yo compraba  
 ella compraba  
 él compraba  
 ellos compraban  
 Ud. compraba  
 tú y yo comprábamos

**7. INVITAR**

él invitaba  
 yo invitaba  
 María invitaba  
 ellos invitaban  
 nosotros invitábamos  
 tú invitabas

**8. REGRESAR**

él regresaba  
 ellos regresaban  
 yo regresaba  
 Uds. regresaban  
 tú regresabas  
 nosotros regresábamos

**9. BUSCAR**

yo buscaba  
 ella buscaba  
 él buscaba  
 ellos buscaban  
 Ud. buscaba  
 tú y yo buscábamos

**10. SACAR**

nosotros sacábamos  
 ellos sacaban  
 yo sacaba  
 Carlos sacaba  
 ella sacaba  
 tú sacabas

**11. TOCAR**

él tocaba  
 yo tocaba  
 María tocaba  
 ellos tocaban  
 nosotros tocábamos  
 tú tocabas

**12. EMPEZAR**

él empezaba  
 ellos empezaban  
 yo empezaba  
 Uds. empezaban  
 tú empezabas  
 nosotros empezábamos