



The Case of the Two Past Tenses

Preterite vs. Imperfect

You are about to tell a story in Spanish. You know the past-tense verbs—but then you face the big question:

Should I use the preterite or the imperfect?

Don't panic. Think of the two tenses as members of a storytelling team:

- The **imperfect** describes what the scene was like.
- The **preterite** tells what happened next.

Let's investigate.

El misterio de la mochila Perdida *The Mystery of the lost Backpack*

Eran las siete y media de la mañana y llovía mucho. Mateo estaba en la cocina. Desayunaba mientras hablaba con su hermana.

It was 7:30 in the morning, and it was raining heavily. Mateo was in the kitchen. He was eating breakfast while talking with his sister.

De repente, miró el reloj y se levantó rápidamente. Tomó su chaqueta, abrió la puerta y salió de la casa.

Suddenly, he looked at the clock and got up quickly. He grabbed his jacket, opened the door, and left the house.

Cuando llegó a la escuela, buscó su mochila. ¡No la tenía!

When he arrived at school, he looked for his backpack. He didn't have it!

Mateo pensó por un momento. Entonces recordó la verdad: mientras desayunaba, su perro dormía debajo de la mesa. La mochila estaba al lado del perro.

Mateo thought for a moment. Then he remembered the truth: while he was eating breakfast, his dog was sleeping under the table. The backpack was next to the dog.

Mateo llamó a su madre. Ella encontró la mochila y la llevó a la escuela. Misterio resuelto.

Mateo called his mother. She found the backpack and brought it to school. Mystery solved.

What did you notice?

The story uses two different past tenses.

The imperfect creates the background

- *Eran las siete y media.*
- *Llovía mucho.*
- *Mateo estaba en la cocina.*
- *Desayunaba.*
- *Su perro dormía debajo de la mesa.*

These details tell us about the time, weather, setting, or actions already in progress. They help us imagine the scene.

The preterite advances the story

- *Miró el reloj.*
- *Se levantó.*
- *Abrió la puerta.*
- *Llegó a la escuela.*
- *Encontró la mochila.*

These are completed actions. Each event moves the story forward.

Think of a movie

Imagine that you are directing a movie.

The **imperfect** controls the scenery and background:

- What was the weather like?
- What time was it?
- Where was everyone?
- What were they doing?
- What did they usually do?

The **preterite** controls the main action:

- What happened?
- What changed?
- What began or ended?
- What interrupted another action?

A simple memory trick is:

Imperfect = what was happening ^[I]_[SEP] **Preterite = what happened**

Background and interruption

The two tenses often appear together when one action interrupts another.

Mateo desayunaba cuando miró el reloj.

Mateo **was eating breakfast** when he **looked at the clock**.

- *desayunaba*: an action already in progress
- *miró*: the completed action that interrupted it

More examples:

- *Yo estudiaba cuando sonó el teléfono.*

- *Caminábamos a casa cuando empezó a llover.*
- *La profesora hablaba cuando un estudiante abrió la puerta.*

Habit or one completed event?

The imperfect often describes something that happened repeatedly.

El año pasado, Mateo caminaba a la escuela todos los días.

This was his usual habit.

The preterite describes a particular completed event.

Ayer, Mateo caminó a la escuela.

He walked to school yesterday, and the action was completed.

Compare:

- *Siempre comíamos a las seis.*^[L]_[SEP] We always ate at six.
- *Anoche comimos a las seis.*^[L]_[SEP] Last night we ate at six.

Signal words: helpful but not magical

Certain expressions frequently appear with each tense.

Often used with the imperfect

- *siempre* — always
- *a menudo* — often
- *todos los días* — every day
- *generalmente* — generally
- *mientras* — while
- *de niño/a* — as a child

Often used with the preterite

- *ayer* — yesterday
- *anoche* — last night

- *de repente* — suddenly
- *una vez* — one time
- *el sábado pasado* — last Saturday
- *entonces* — then

These expressions provide clues, but the meaning of the sentence should determine the tense.

Does changing the tense change the meaning?

Yes. Consider the verb *tener*:

Lucía tenía un perro.

Lucía had a dog. This describes an existing situation, without telling us when it began or ended.

Lucía tuvo un perro durante dos años.

Lucía had a dog for two years. The speaker treats that period as completed.

Now compare *saber*:

Carlos sabía la respuesta.

Carlos knew the answer.

Carlos supo la respuesta ayer.

Carlos found out the answer yesterday.

Sometimes choosing a different past tense changes more than the timeline—it changes the meaning of the verb.

Your turn: solve the tense

Choose the correct verb form.

- 1 Mientras Elena (**hacía** / **hizo**) la tarea, su amiga la llamó.
- 2 Anoche nosotros (**veíamos** / **vimos**) una película.
- 3 Cuando yo era niño, (**jugaba** / **jugué**) en el parque todos los días.
- 4 (**Eran** / **Fueron**) las nueve cuando comenzó el concierto.
- 5 De repente, el perro (**corría** / **corrió**) hacia la puerta.

- 6 La familia (**cenaba** / **cenó**) cuando se apagaron las luces.
- 7 El sábado pasado, mis amigos y yo (**íbamos** / **fuimos**) al centro comercial.
- 8 Generalmente, mi abuelo (**contaba** / **contó**) historias después de la cena.

Comprehension challenge

Answer in Spanish using complete sentences.

- 1 ¿Qué tiempo hacía al principio de la historia?
- 2 ¿Qué hacía Mateo en la cocina?
- 3 ¿Cuándo descubrió que no tenía la mochila?
- 4 ¿Dónde estaba la mochila?
- 5 ¿Quién llevó la mochila a la escuela?

Writing challenge: an unexpected interruption

Write six to eight sentences about an ordinary activity interrupted by something unexpected.

Begin by establishing the scene with the imperfect:

Eran las...[SEP]Hacía...[SEP]Yo estaba...[SEP]Mis amigos hacían...

Then introduce the interruption with the preterite:

De repente...

Underline your imperfect verbs once and your preterite verbs twice.

Answer key

Solve the tense

- 1 *hacía*
- 2 *vimos*
- 3 *jugaba*
- 4 *Eran*
- 5 *corrió*

6 *cenaba*

7 *fuimos*

8 *contaba*

Comprehension challenge

1 Llovía mucho.

2 Mateo desayunaba y hablaba con su hermana.

3 Descubrió que no tenía la mochila cuando llegó a la escuela.

4 La mochila estaba en la cocina, al lado del perro.

5 Su madre llevó la mochila a la escuela.

The case is closed

The preterite and imperfect are not enemies. They perform different jobs:

The imperfect sets the scene. The preterite tells the events.

When you use them together, your Spanish stops sounding like a list of actions and starts sounding like a real story.