

Preterite vs Imperfect: Part I

Spanish has two past tenses: preterite and imperfect. Most verbs can be put into either tense, depending upon the meaning. In this lesson, you will learn to conjugate regular -ar verbs in the preterite and the imperfect. You will also learn the basic difference between the preterite and the imperfect, so that you can begin using them correctly.

To conjugate regular -ar verbs in the preterite, simply drop the ending (-ar) and add one of the following:

é
aste
ó
amos
asteis
aron

To conjugate regular -ar verbs in the imperfect, simply drop the ending (-ar) and add one of the following:

aba
abas
aba
ábamos
abais
aban

Compare the verb “hablar” conjugated in the preterite and the imperfect.

PRETERITE	IMPERFECT
hablé	hablaba
hablaste	hablabas
habló	hablaba
hablamos	hablábamos
hablasteis	hablabais
hablaron	hablaban

Generally speaking, the preterite is used for actions in the past that are seen as completed. Use of the preterite tense implies that the past action had a definite beginning and definite end.

Juan **habló** de la una hasta las dos.
Juan spoke from one until two o'clock.
(clearly stated beginning and end)

It is important to realize that the beginning and the end may not always be clearly stated.

Juan habló dos horas.

Juan spoke for two hours.
(implied beginning and end)

Juan **habló** con la estudiante.

Juan spoke with the student.
(implied beginning and end)

Generally speaking, the imperfect is used for actions in the past that are not seen as completed. Use of the imperfect tense implies that the past action did not have a definite beginning or a definite end.

Las chicas **hablaban** en inglés.
The girls used to speak in English.
(no definite beginning or end)

You have now learned the basic difference between the preterite and the imperfect:

The preterite tells us **specifically** when an action took place.
The imperfect tells us **in general** when an action took place.

NOTE: Although this difference may appear simple, this is actually a complex topic, and you will learn the finer points in later lessons.

Let's add two more flashcards, one for regular -ar preterite, and one for regular -ar imperfect:

Verb Flashcards

39. **Preterite: regular -ar verbs**

-é

-aste

-ó

-amos

-asteis

-aron

hablé, hablaste, habló, hablamos, hablasteis, hablaron

40. **Imperfect: regular -ar verbs**

-aba

-abas

-aba

-ábamos

-abais

-aban

hablaba, hablabas, hablaba, hablábamos, hablabais, hablaban