



# The imperfect tense

.5.

The imperfect (**el pretérito imperfecto** or **el imperfecto**) is a tense used to communicate certain circumstances about actions occurring in the past. One of these circumstances is the unspecified duration or length of the action, another is how frequently the action took place.

When narrating in the past, we may want to recount what we used to do in earlier days, without setting specific times or the length of the actions. We may consider this an indeterminate duration. The beginning and ending of the action is neither specified nor necessary for your message.

**Yo tenía** un perro.                      *I used to have a dog.*

The message may also indicate the repeated nature of some actions while, again, not specifying the length of the action or the point at which it started or finished. In the next example, the imperfect communicates an action that was ongoing in the past:

Mi perro Sultán y yo                      *My dog Sultan and I played*  
**jugábamos** casi todos                      *almost every day.*  
los días.

## Regular Verbs in the Imperfect

The imperfect is formed by dropping the endings of the infinitive, **-ar**, **-er**, and **-ir**, and adding the following endings:

<b>nadar</b> ( <i>to swim</i> )	
nadaba	nadábamos
nadabas	nadabais
nadaba	nadaban

comer (to eat)		vivir (to live)	
comía	comíamos	vivía	vivíamos
comías	comíais	vivías	vivíais
comía	comían	vivía	vivían

Note that in the imperfect:

- **-er** and **-ir** verbs share the same endings and all forms have a written accent mark.
- the **nosotros** form is the only **-ar** verb with a written accent mark.

## ejercicio

## 5-1

*Visita a Punta Cana. Usa la forma apropiada del imperfecto de los verbos entre paréntesis.*

1. Todas las mañanas, Ignacio \_\_\_\_\_ (caminar) por la arena en la playa.
2. Por lo general Ignacio \_\_\_\_\_ (ponerse) su careta para bucear (*swim underwater*).
3. Generalmente él \_\_\_\_\_ (nadar) por un rato y luego \_\_\_\_\_ (dormir).
4. De vez en cuando nosotros dos \_\_\_\_\_ (jugar) al voleibol en la playa.
5. También yo \_\_\_\_\_ (correr) por la arena muchas veces.
6. Raras veces, yo \_\_\_\_\_ (volver) a mi habitación antes de las tres.
7. Todos los días, yo \_\_\_\_\_ (comer) platos dominicanos.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ (Querer, yo) visitar Fun-Fun, una cueva (*cave*) muy profunda cerca del hotel.
9. Ignacio \_\_\_\_\_ (preferir) un vuelo en helicóptero.
10. Él y yo \_\_\_\_\_ (soñar) con pescar barracudas en un barco grande.

## ejercicio

## 5-2

*¿Qué hacía Carlos? Usa el verbo más apropiado para cada frase. Escribe la forma correspondiente del imperfecto.*

aprender    cantar    leer    recibir    tocar  
arreglar    jugar    mirar    tener    vivir

1. \_\_\_\_\_ fútbol todos los días.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ en su clase mucho.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ su cama todas las mañanas.

4. \_\_\_\_\_ el piano a menudo.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ buenas notas.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ cuentos de fantasía.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ en San Antonio.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ la televisión por las noches.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ un perro y un gato.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ cuando se bañaba.

### **Irregular Verbs in the Imperfect**

It is easy to remember that:

- there are only three verbs with irregular conjugations in the imperfect: **ir**, **ser**, and **ver**.

<b>ir</b> (to go)	<b>ser</b> (to be)	<b>ver</b> (to see)
iba      íbamos	era      éramos	veía      veíamos
ibas      ibais	eras      erais	veías      veíais
iba      iban	era      eran	veía      veían

#### **ejercicio**

#### **5-3**

**Festivales de música caribeña.** Usa la forma apropiada del imperfecto de *ir*, *ver* o *ser*, de acuerdo al contenido de la frase.

1. Todos los veranos, nosotros \_\_\_\_\_ a un festival de música del Caribe.
2. Los conciertos \_\_\_\_\_ en San Juan.
3. Los grupos de cantantes siempre \_\_\_\_\_ fantásticos.
4. Mis amigos y yo \_\_\_\_\_ muy jóvenes y animábamos (*cheer*) a los grupos.
5. Personas de todas las edades \_\_\_\_\_ los conciertos en una pantalla gigante en un parque.
6. El espectáculo \_\_\_\_\_ divertido y la gente bailaba y cantaba.
7. Carlos y Ana \_\_\_\_\_ a sus padres bailando y sacaban fotos.
8. Al final del festival los músicos y los cantantes \_\_\_\_\_ a saludar al público.

## When Is the Imperfect Used in Spanish?

The imperfect is one of the tenses used to narrate past actions. Unlike the preterit, the imperfect does not refer to the specific time an action took place or when the beginning or the end of an action occurred. The imperfect tense describes the ongoing duration of an action or how frequently the action took place. You will use the imperfect tense:

- to describe continuing, ongoing actions in the past.

Elsa **tenía** muchos amigos y pocas preocupaciones.

*Elsa had many friends and few worries.*

The above example refers to a past time (**tenía**). It does not tell us exactly when or for how long Elsa was in these circumstances. The speaker's message (with **tenía**) includes the notion of a continuing action.

- to indicate actions that took place on a regular basis, actions that were repeated, or were habitual or customary in the past.

Cuando Carlos **vivía** en Nueva York, **iba** al teatro con frecuencia.

*When Carlos lived in New York, he used to go to the theater frequently.*

In the previous example, the imperfect form **vivía** refers to a past, ongoing time when Carlos lived in New York. It does not tell us when specifically the action of **vivir** took place, nor for how long. The second part of the sentence, **iba** (*he used to go*), refers to a past action whose exact time or number of times is not specified, since it is not important to the message. Rather, the emphasis is on the repeated nature of Carlos's activity, reinforced by the expression **con frecuencia** (*frequently*).

### ejercicio

### 5-4

*Práctica. Escribe la forma apropiada del imperfecto.*

1. Alisha \_\_\_\_\_ (salir) de compras.
2. Sergio y su hermano \_\_\_\_\_ (montar) a caballo.
3. Nosotros no \_\_\_\_\_ (bailar) salsa.
4. Sus hijos \_\_\_\_\_ (tener) hambre.
5. Mis padres ya \_\_\_\_\_ (saber) mi historia.
6. Tú y yo ya \_\_\_\_\_ (conocer) ese libro.
7. Los músicos \_\_\_\_\_ (tocar) una sinfonía.
8. Ud. \_\_\_\_\_ (poder) descansar.
9. Yo \_\_\_\_\_ (querer) un reloj de oro.

## Other Uses of the Imperfect

The imperfect tense is also used in other circumstances. Remember to use the imperfect:

- to describe people or states of indefinite duration in the past.

**Era** un político muy honrado. *He was a very honest politician.*

In this example, **era** underscores the ongoing nature of the characteristic. Again, the description does not convey a specific time or times.

Keep in mind that **ser** is used to describe qualities or states of indefinite duration in the past.

Marta **era** extremadamente cuidadosa. *Marta was extremely careful.*

- to express the English equivalent of the construction *would* + verb, referring to actions that took place repeatedly or customarily in the past.

**Yo pasaba** muchas horas allí. *I used to (would) spend many hours there.*

Note that this use of *would* does not imply the conditional mood in English. There is no condition to be met. Compare the following examples and observe the context.

<b>Compraría</b> ( <i>conditional</i> ) el carro pero no tiene dinero.	<i>She would buy the car but she does not have the money.</i>
<b>Compraba</b> ( <i>imperfect</i> ) un vestido nuevo todos los meses el día de cobro.	<i>She would buy (used to buy) a new dress every month on payday.</i>

In the first example, *would buy* is a clear use of the conditional in English and corresponds to the use of the conditional in Spanish; if a condition were met—having money—then *she would buy the car*. In the second example, *she would buy* is the same as “she used to buy,” a customary action and the Spanish equivalent is **compraba**. The sentence includes an expression of time, **todos los meses**, indicating a repeated action and showing its habitual nature (**compraba**).

### ejercicio

### 5-5

*¿Qué hacían? En español.*

1. Ana would buy chocolates. \_\_\_\_\_
2. I used to write postcards. \_\_\_\_\_
3. She used to swim. \_\_\_\_\_
4. You (Ud.) would call often. \_\_\_\_\_
5. You (Uds.) and I would work. \_\_\_\_\_
6. They used to go to the library. \_\_\_\_\_
7. You (tú) would always help. \_\_\_\_\_
8. Louise and you (tú) would save money. \_\_\_\_\_

Certain expressions of time stress the customary or repetitive nature of the actions in the imperfect tense. You learned some of these expressions in **ejercicio 5-1**. The list that follows contains several more. Try to use these expressions when you use the imperfect to communicate repeated actions in the past.

### vocabulario

<b>a menudo</b>	often	<b>muchas veces</b>	many times
<b>a veces</b>	at times	<b>por lo general</b>	generally
<b>algunas veces</b>	sometimes	<b>rara vez</b>	rarely
<b>casi nunca</b>	hardly ever	<b>siempre</b>	always
<b>casi siempre</b>	almost always	<b>todas las mañanas</b>	every morning
<b>de vez en cuando</b>	from time to time	<b>todos los años</b>	every year
<b>generalmente</b>	generally	<b>todos los días</b>	every day
<b>mientras</b>	while		

### ejercicio

### 5-6

*En español. Usa la forma apropiada del imperfecto en tus respuestas.*

1. Every day she would rest after lunch. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Almost always they put sugar in their coffee. \_\_\_\_\_
3. At times you (Ud.) would get up early. \_\_\_\_\_
4. From time to time Sheila stayed at home. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Generally the train arrived late in the morning. \_\_\_\_\_
6. Many times I would miss the bus. \_\_\_\_\_
7. My mother would hardly ever sleep. \_\_\_\_\_

### More About the Uses of the Imperfect

The imperfect is also used:

- to express age in the past.

La actriz **tenía** treinta años.

*The actress was thirty years old.*

- to describe the background or circumstances of an action.

**Era** un día hermoso, fresco.

*It was a beautiful, cool day.*

- to indicate the time of day in the past.

**Eran** las cuatro de la tarde.

*It was four in the afternoon.*

## ejercicio

5-7

*Cuando Lucinda vivía en Ponce. Traduce las experiencias de Lucinda. Nota las frases que indican las costumbres y actividades usuales.*

1. When I was twenty years old, I used to live in Ponce, Puerto Rico. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Every morning I went to my Spanish class. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Usually, my class would end at midday. \_\_\_\_\_
4. My friends and I wanted to stay in a nice city. \_\_\_\_\_
5. I would often go to the market to talk to the local folks. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Once in a while, I would miss my family. \_\_\_\_\_
7. But hardly ever would I want to go back home. \_\_\_\_\_
8. On Sundays, Carla and Jorge used to take me to have dinner at their home. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Carlos would make jokes, but they were not funny. \_\_\_\_\_

## ejercicio

5-8

*¿Por qué usamos el imperfecto? Go back to your answers to the previous exercise (ejercicio 5-7). For each statement, write down any key Spanish expression that signals a customary or repeated action. If no expression of time appears in a given statement, leave a blank.*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_



The imperfect is also used to express the past:

- to indicate a mental state, a mental action, or a state of indefinite duration with verbs such as **sentir**, **creer**, **conocer**, **pensar**, **querer**, and **saber**. Mental states are considered ongoing conditions.

Él **pensaba** en mí.

*He thought about me.*

Nos **conocíamos** desde que **éramos** pequeños.

*We have known each other since we were little.*

Me **gustaba** caminar por las calles.

*I used to like walking down the streets.*

- in the Spanish equivalent of the English *-ing* forms, referring to past actions. Usually they refer to *simultaneous* actions, and there is no mention of a specific time in the past.

Ella **trabajaba** y yo **descansaba**.

*She was working and I was resting.*

El ladrón **salía** mientras **nosotras** **entrábamos** a la habitación.

*The thief was leaving while we were going into the room.*

## ejercicio

## 5-9

*Y el verbo es... Completa las frases con la forma apropiada de uno de los verbos. Usa el imperfecto.*

<b>comprar</b>	<b>estar</b>	<b>salir</b>
<b>decir</b>	<b>pensar</b>	<b>sentir</b>

- Siempre \_\_\_\_\_ en tí.
- Yo no \_\_\_\_\_ mentiras (*lies*).
- Sus amigos \_\_\_\_\_ mucho dolor.
- En el cine tú \_\_\_\_\_ las entradas.
- El día \_\_\_\_\_ espectacular.
- Llovía cuando tú \_\_\_\_\_ de la tienda.

## The Imperfect and the Preterit in the Same Sentence

Often more than one tense will be needed in a sentence: the imperfect to point out ongoing actions or background information and the preterit to express actions seen as “interrupting” the actions in the imperfect.

Llovía y de momento **salió** el sol.

*It was raining and all of a sudden the sun came out.*

In the previous example note the description in the past. The verb **llovía** appears in the imperfect. While this action is taking place, a different action is expressed in the preterit (**salió**). **De momento** (*suddenly*) points to the specific time that action took place. The preterit is the appropriate tense to express the “interrupting” action.

Mientras **caminaba** por la calle me saludó Juan.

*While I was walking down the street, Juan greeted me.*

The ongoing action in the second example above is **caminaba**, expressed with reference to **saludó**, an action completed in the past. Again, the preterit is used to describe the “interrupting” action.

## ejercicio

5-10

*Ahora tú. Escribe la forma apropiada del imperfecto.*

1. Yo \_\_\_\_\_ (dormir) cuando Robin me llamó para darme la noticia.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ (Haber) una venta especial en mi tienda favorita de aparatos electrónicos.
3. Robin \_\_\_\_\_ (querer) comprar un ordenador nuevo.
4. La venta especial \_\_\_\_\_ (ser) fenomenal.
5. Ese día ellos \_\_\_\_\_ (tener) una rifa (*raffle*) para una computadora.
6. Yo \_\_\_\_\_ (preferir) descansar en casa pero acompañé a Robin.
7. Cuando llegamos, los vendedores \_\_\_\_\_ (ayudar) a muchos clientes.

## ejercicio

5-11

*¿Qué pasó mientras Luis...? Escribe la forma apropiada del imperfecto del verbo que corresponde a cada oración.*

bañarse	entrar	leer	regresar
dormir	hablar	mirar	ser

1. \_\_\_\_\_ cuando sonó el despertador.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ cuando tú llamaste por teléfono.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ el periódico y entonces el perro quiso salir al patio.
4. Salía de casa cuando \_\_\_\_\_ las ocho.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ en el mercado cuando empezó a llover.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ la televisión cuando empezó su película favorita.
7. Mientras \_\_\_\_\_ con un cliente, el jefe lo interrumpió.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ a casa cuando descubrieron al ladrón.

## ejercicio

5-12

*Preguntas personales.*

1. ¿Qué hacías ayer mientras trabajabas? \_\_\_\_\_
2. ¿Qué soñaste cuando dormías? \_\_\_\_\_
3. ¿Qué anunciaron mientras escuchabas la radio? \_\_\_\_\_
4. ¿Dónde estabas cuando sonó el teléfono? \_\_\_\_\_
5. ¿Quién te interrumpió cuando hablabas por teléfono? \_\_\_\_\_

## ejercicio

5-13

*Un viaje a las aguas del Caribe. Traduce. Usa el vocabulario útil.*

Charlotte travels frequently. When she was a girl she would visit her aunt in Alaska. They would take guided tours to watch the whales. When she was a student at a university she wanted to be a marine biologist. In those days she would prefer to travel to the Caribbean. In the spring she would book a round-trip ticket. She always traveled on a nonstop flight to Punta Cana, in the Dominican Republic. As usual, she would check her luggage and walk to the gate. Upon landing, she would pick up her suitcase and go through customs. Her suitcase was heavy because she would pack her diving gear. From the airport, she would go on a bus to a hotel in the Bay of Samaná. The next day she was ready for an exciting experience: whale watching in a warm climate. Charlotte was able to watch and study more whales in the Caribbean than in Alaska!

## vocabulario útil

as usual	como de costumbre	suitcase	la maleta
bay	la bahía	ticket	el boleto, el billete
Bay of Samaná	la Bahía de Samaná	to book (a trip)	hacer la reserva (de un viaje)
customs	la aduana	to check luggage	facturar el equipaje
gate	la puerta de embarque	to dive	bucear
guided tour	la excursión con guía	upon landing	al aterrizar
luggage	el equipaje	whale	la ballena
nonstop flight	el vuelo directo	whale watching	observar las ballenas
round-trip ticket	el billete, el boleto de ida y vuelta		

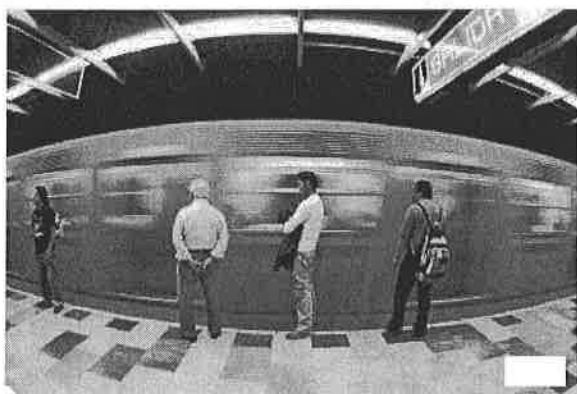
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Verb Expresses Idea That Something Usually Occurs

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olimos viajar al trabajo por metro al centro de México. (We usually commute by subway to downtown Mexico City.) Photo by Eneas De Trovaz; licensed via Creative Commons.

By Gerald Erichsen

*Soler* is a verb frequently used to indicate that someone does something as a customary practice or that something usually happens. Although it is a common auxiliary verb, it is unusual in at least three ways:

- It is a defective verb in that it isn't used in all forms. It is rarely used in tenses other than the present indicative, imperfect indicative and present subjunctive,

although it can be used with the past participle to form the present perfect.

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- It is almost always followed by an infinitive.
- It is a stem-changing verb; when the stem is stressed, the *-o-* changes to *-ue-*. So the first-person indicative present form of *soler* is *suelo*. In other words (except for the fact that not all potential conjugated forms are used), it follows the same conjugation pattern as *contar*.

*Soler* can be translated in a variety of ways, depending on the context, although its basic meaning is always the same. Possible translations are "to be used to," "usually," "customarily," "to regularly" and the like.

Here are some examples of *soler* in use. Translations given aren't the only possible ones:

- *Suelo utilizar cualquier mochila que tengo a mano.* (I usually use whatever backpack I have handy.)
- *Solíamos tener cinco o seis meses de lluvia, pero ahora la temporada de*

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*lluvia es mucho más corta.* (We used to have five or six months of rain, but now the rainy season is much shorter.)

- *Los movimientos populares masivos en Latinoamérica no suelen atraer a los intelectuales.* (Massive popular movements in Latin America do not typically attract intellectuals.)

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not used to staying calm.)

- *¿Qué sueles comer en un restaurante chino?* (What do you usually eat in a Chinese restaurant?)

- *Solían ir en grupos y vestían todos igual.* (They used to go in groups and would all dress alike.)
- *Hoy en día no es algo que solamos tener en la cocina.* (Nowadays it isn't something we usually have in the kitchen.)
- *YouTube no es un sitio web que yo suela visitar.* (YouTube isn't a website I regularly visit.)
- *No me suelo quedar tranquila.* (I'm

## Conjugation

Here is the complete conjugation of the simple forms of *soler*. Irregular forms, caused by changing the *-o-* of the stem to *-ue-* when it is stressed, are in boldface:

- **Present indicative:** yo **suelo**, tú **sueles**, él/ella/usted **suele**, nosotros/nosotras **solemos**, os **soléis**, ellos/ellas/ustedes **suelen**
- **Imperfect:** yo *solía*, tú *solías*, él/ella/usted *solía*, nosotros/nosotras *solíamos*, os *solíais*, ellos/ellas/ustedes *solían*.
- **Present subjunctive:** yo **suela**, tú **suelas**, él/ella/usted **suela**, nosotros/nosotras **solamos**, os **soláis**, ellos/ellas/ustedes **suelan**.
- **Gerund:** *soliendo*.
- **Past participle:** *solido*.

## Etymology and Related Words

*Soler* came from the Latin verb *solere*, which had much the same meaning. It does not appear to be closely related to any word in English.

The Spanish words closely related to *soler* are the adjectives *sólito* (usual or ordinary; this word is seldom used), *insólito* (unusual or odd) and *insolente* (rude or arrogant). Examples of their use:

- *La resolución solo pide a los ciudadanos resolver sus problemas sólitos.* (The resolution only asks the citizens to solve their usual problems.)
- *Psicólogos rusos dicen que curan adicciones con el insólito método de golpes en los glúteos.* (Russian psychologists say they cure addictions with the odd method of blows to the backside.)
- *Usted ha sido muy insolente al hacerlo después de todo lo que conté.* (You were very rude to do it after everything I told you.)

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