

More about the preterit and the imperfect

.6.

Summary and Contrast of the Preterit and the Imperfect

Continue to review and contrast the uses of the preterit and the imperfect, keeping in mind the ideas you want to communicate when narrating in the past. In English, the context often communicates the meanings conveyed by Spanish verb tenses alone, since Spanish verb endings give the subject of the verb and also the time (present, past, future, etc.). Contrast *She used to smoke* with **Fumaba**, where a single word indicates a habitual action repeated in the past.

This unit will help you review and practice the preterit and the imperfect and their specific messages. As you work with the exercises, you may wish to go back to the previous units (Units 4 and 5) on the preterit and the imperfect to review the explanations.

The following list summarizes the uses of the preterit and the imperfect tenses.

Preterit

Use the preterit when you wish:

- to indicate an action that took place in the past.

Ellos se casaron el mes pasado.

They got married last month.

- to express an action completed at a definite moment in the past.

Los Ortega regresaron anoche.

The Ortegas returned last night.

Yo estuve en su casa por tres horas.

I was in their house for three hours.

- to express a series of actions or events completed in the past.

Tú **entraste**, **miraste** a Felipe y le **diste** la mano. *You entered, looked at Felipe, and shook his hand.*

- to express actions that, because of their nature, are not usually repeated, such as: *to get married (casarse)*, *to turn a specific age (cumplir años)*, *to realize (something) (darse cuenta de)*, *to decide (decidir)*, *to graduate (graduarse)*, *to die (morir)*, etc.

El hijo de Antonio **nació** en ese hospital. *Antonio's son was born in that hospital.*

Here are some expressions associated with the use of the preterit:

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| anoche | last night | entonces | then |
| anteanoche | the night before last | finalmente | finally |
| anteayer | the day before yesterday | la semana pasada | last week |
| ayer | yesterday | por fin | finally |
| de pronto | suddenly | por primera vez | for the first time |
| de repente | suddenly | un día | one day |
| el mes pasado | last month | una noche | one night |
| en ese (aquel) instante | at that moment | una vez | once |
| en ese (aquel) momento | at that moment | | |

Imperfect

Use the imperfect tense:

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

Yo **veía** a mis primos todas las semanas. *I used to see my cousins every week.*

- to describe continuing or ongoing conditions or actions in the past.

El teatro **tenía** tres salidas. *The theater had three exits.*

- to describe people or states of indefinite duration in the past with no reference to its beginning or end.

Su esposo **era** alto. *Her husband was tall.*
Nosotros **estábamos** muy nerviosos. *We were very nervous.*

- to express age in the past.

Mis abuelos **tenían** sesenta años. *My grandparents were sixty years old.*

- to express time in the past.

Eran las diez. *It was ten o'clock.*

- to express a mental state or a mental action.

Ellas **pensaban** en sus parientes. *They were thinking (used to think) about their relatives.*

Here are some expressions associated with the use of the imperfect:

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| a menudo | often, frequently | mientras | while |
| a veces | at times | muchas veces | many times |
| algunas veces | sometimes | normalmente | normally |
| cada día, cada noche | each day, each night | por lo general | generally |
| con frecuencia | frequently, often | siempre | always |
| constantemente | constantly | todas las mañanas, | every morning, |
| de costumbre | usually | tardes... | afternoon . . . |
| de vez en cuando | from time to time | todos los meses, | every month, |
| frecuentemente | frequently | años... | year . . . |
| generalmente | generally | | |

ejercicio

6-1

¿El pretérito o el imperfecto? Escribe la forma apropiada del verbo entre paréntesis.

- _____ (Ser) las seis de la mañana.
- Catalina _____ (salir) de su habitación.
- En ese momento _____ (oír) un trueno (*thunder*).
- Cata _____ (tener) miedo.
- Entonces, _____ (decidir) salir de la casa.
- Ella _____ (escuchar) un mensaje en el radio de su auto: "Se acerca una tormenta".
- Entonces, Cata _____ (regresar) a casa.
- Después _____ (ir) a la cocina y miró el calendario. ¡Qué bien!
- _____ (Ser) el día de paga (*payday*).
- Y en ese momento, Cata _____ (sentirse) mucho mejor.

ejercicio

6-2

Los domingos. En español. El domingo, ¿es tu día favorito también? Usa el pretérito para los verbos en cursiva.

- Sunday was my favorite day of the week. I would wake up late and read the newspaper in bed.

- That Sunday *was* different. _____
- I *got up* early, *got dressed* quickly, and *left* to ride my bike around the neighborhood (**el barrio**).

4. It was a beautiful morning. It was chilly, too. _____
5. While I rode my bicycle there were many active people in the park. _____
6. Two young women were jogging while a dog followed them. _____
7. An older gentleman exercised in the park and two children played. _____
8. Suddenly, so much activity *made* me feel tired. _____
9. I then *went* back home, *put away* the bike, and *fixed* a cup of hot chocolate. _____

ejercicio

6-3

La decisión correcta. Go back to your Spanish translations for the previous exercise (ejercicio 6-2), and explain why each of the verbs in English italics was best translated by the preterit.

2. _____
3. _____
8. _____
9. _____

More Uses of the Preterit and the Imperfect

The following reference list contains a few more uses of these two tenses.

- The preterit is used to “interrupt” an ongoing action or the background information surrounding an action in the past.

Hacía un día hermoso y de repente
empezó a llover.

*It was a beautiful day and suddenly it started
to rain.*

El reportero **salía** de la tienda cuando
ocurrió el accidente.

*The reporter was leaving the store when the
accident occurred.*

- The imperfect is used to indicate simultaneous actions.

Ana **cocinaba** mientras yo **preparaba**
la mesa.

Ana cooked while I set the table.

- If you want to express an action that went on for a period of time in the past, you may use the following constructions: 1) **hacía** + expression of time + **que** + verb in the imperfect, or 2) verb in the imperfect + **desde hacía** + expression of time.

Hacía tres meses **que trabajaba** en la
oficina de turismo.
Trabajaba en la oficina de turismo
desde hacía tres meses.

*I had been working in the tourist office
for three months.*

To ask a question using this construction, use either of the following models.

¿Cuánto (tiempo) hacía que + verb in the imperfect?

¿Hacia cuánto (tiempo) que + verb in the imperfect?

Study the following three examples of these constructions and their single English equivalent.

¿Cuánto tiempo hacía que trabajabas
en la oficina de turismo?

¿Hacia cuánto tiempo que trabajabas
en la oficina de turismo?

¿Desde cuándo trabajabas en la oficina
de turismo?

} *How long had you been working in the
tourist office?*

If you want to express a past action that took place at a specific time (*ago*), use the preterit in the following construction:

Hace + expression of time + **que** + verb in the preterit

Hace dos meses que vi a Ricardo.

I saw Ricardo two months ago.

ejercicio

6-4

En español.

1. While I was doing my work, a patient called me on the phone. _____
2. She was talking and all of a sudden she hung up (**colgar**) the phone. _____
3. I was looking for a document when someone knocked on the door. _____
4. My assistant opened the window (**la ventanilla**) while I filled out the form (**el formulario**). _____

ejercicio

6-5

¿Qué hacías tú? Traduce la expresión entre paréntesis. Then use it to tell how often you used to do these actions when you were younger. Note the example.

EJEMPLO iba a la playa (*once in a while*) → Yo iba a la playa de vez en cuando.

Cuando yo era más joven...

1. leía novelas de ciencia-ficción (*often*) _____
2. salía con mis amigos (*every weekend*) _____
3. ponía la mesa para la cena (*every night*) _____
4. no me preocupaba mucho (*never*) _____
5. era muy impaciente (*always*) _____

ejercicio

6-6

En español. Escribe en español la expresión entre paréntesis.

1. _____ (On Monday) compré una novela de ciencia-ficción.
2. _____ (Last weekend) salí con mis amigos.
3. _____ (Last night) puse la mesa para la cena.
4. _____ (Two months ago) estuve preocupado por mi situación económica.
5. _____ (Yesterday) estaba muy impaciente.
6. _____ (This morning) pensé en mis padres.

ejercicio

6-7

¿Cuál es la respuesta correcta? Decide si el pretérito o el imperfecto es la respuesta correcta y subráyala. Remember that the message in an isolated sentence must rely on the words surrounding the verb. You may find that both tenses are acceptable in some of your answers.

1. Julio (salía | salió) a las ocho en punto.
2. (Hacía | Hizo) buen tiempo cuando empezó el partido de tenis.
3. (Veíamos | Vimos) la película el mes pasado.
4. Los vendedores (ganaban | ganaron) el 20% de comisión ese día.
5. Los niños (creían | creyeron) el cuento.
6. Ustedes (eran | fueron) imparciales.
7. Mientras tú cantabas yo (tocaba | toqué) el piano.

ejercicio

6-8

¿Por qué es la respuesta correcta? For each of the sentences in the previous exercise (ejercicio 6-7), write the reason you chose the preterit or the imperfect. If a key expression gives you a clue, include it in your answer.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

Verbs with a Special Meaning: *Ponerse*, *Volverse*, and *Hacerse*

Some verbs are used more frequently in the past than in other tenses. One example in English is *to become*. **Poner(se)**, **volver(se)**, and **hacer(se)** are all reflexive verbs (used with the corresponding reflexive pronouns) that express *to become* in English. For a more detailed explanation of reflexive constructions in Spanish, consult Unit 8 in this book.

Note the use of the preterit in the following examples. Keep in mind that in different contexts these verbs communicate different ideas. These examples are narrations in the past, but you will also see these verbs in other tenses.

- Use **ponerse** + adjective to express changes of an emotional or physical nature.

Él se puso enojado.

He became angry.

- Use **volverse** + adjective to express an involuntary or sudden change.

Carlos se volvió loco.

Carlos became crazy.

The message intended here implies a sudden expression of rage that may suggest true insanity.

- Use **hacerse** + noun or adjective or **llegar a ser** + adjective (not reflexive) to express a profession or social status which required effort, dedication, and time.

Yo me hice contable.

I became an accountant.

Nosotros llegamos a ser mejores que los otros jugadores.

We became better than the other players.

ejercicio

6-9

Y en tu caso... ¿Verdadero o falso?

- _____ 1. Después de estudiar mucho, me hice ingeniero(a).
- _____ 2. Cuando me aumentaron el sueldo me puse muy contento(a).
- _____ 3. De tanto pensar en mi problema, me volví loco(a).
- _____ 4. Practiqué mucho y llegué a ser un(a) gran tenista.
- _____ 5. Cuando vi los resultados de la bolsa de valores (*the stock market*), me puse triste.

ejercicio

6-10

¿Cuál es la respuesta correcta? Subraya la respuesta apropiada para cada una de las siguientes oraciones.

1. Después de asistir a la universidad por cuatro años, Julio (se volvió | se hizo) maestro.
2. Cuando su novia le dijo que no quería salir más con él, (se hizo | se puso) triste.
3. Me robaron la cartera en el metro y cuando me di cuenta, (me volví | me puse) nerviosa.
4. Después de trabajar mucho, nosotros (nos hicimos | nos pusimos) ricos.
5. Te dije una mentira y (te pusiste | te hiciste) histérica.
6. Julieta encontró un billete de \$100.00 y (se volvió | se hizo) loca de alegría.

ejercicio

6-11

Una boda magnífica. Traduce. Usa el vocabulario útil.

Five years ago, María Luisa married Jacobo. He studied five years in Miami and became an engineer. The ceremony was in the evening in a beautiful chapel in Santo Domingo. After the wedding, the reception started at nine o'clock at night in an old mansion. While the guests waited for the bride and groom they chatted and had a drink. Suddenly, they heard music and they realized the newlyweds were there. The guests were waiting to see María Luisa and her father dance. All of a sudden, they heard a "merengue," a typical dance from the Dominican Republic. This is a Dominican tradition and the guests enjoyed the dance. Then, Jacobo danced with María Luisa. Everyone joined them on the floor and danced all night. No one wanted to stop dancing. Jacobo and María Luisa sneaked out around one-thirty in the morning. The next day they left on a cruise from Florida to the British Isles for their honeymoon.

vocabulario útil

| | | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|
| around | a eso de | honeymoon | la luna de miel |
| bride | la novia | newlywed | el/la recién casado(a) |
| chapel | la capilla | orchestra | la orquesta |
| despite | a pesar de | to join | acompañar |
| Dominican | dominicano(a) | to marry | casarse con |
| engineer | el/la ingeniero(a) | to realize | darse cuenta de |
| enjoy | disfrutar | to sneak away | escabullirse; escaparse |
| groom | el novio | wedding | la boda |
| guest | el/la invitado(a) | | |