

Pretérito e imperfecto
by Michael Cartmill

In order to fully explain the uses of these past tenses, combine a traditional explanation with a visual conceptualization.

El **pretérito** se usa para:

1) Narrar acciones o eventos en el pasado que se han cumplido o terminado.
Dice lo que pasó.

Visité a mi abuela.
I visited my grandma.

Ramón estudió por tres horas.
Ramon studied for three hours.

2) Expresar el comienzo o fin de eventos o acciones en el pasado.

Las clases comenzaron ayer.
Classes started yesterday.

La fiesta terminó a la una.
The party ended at one.

--Narrar eventos o acciones que ocurren en una serie.

El alumno entró, se sentó, miró a los demás y salió.
The student came in, sat down, looked at everyone else and left.

El **imperfecto** se usa para:

1) Describir lo que ocurrió en el pasado, usualmente con relación a otro evento pero sin referencia a su comienzo o fin. También la forma (-ing) en inglés.

Era una noche fría.
It was a cold night.

Caminaba por las calles.
He was walking through the streets.

2) Expresar acciones o eventos habituales en el pasado (“used to” or “would” in English when referring to the past).

Siempre venía atrasado.
She always came late.

Vistábamos a mi hermano cada verano.
We used to (would) visit my brother every summer.

3) Expresar la hora y la edad en el pasado.

Eran las tres de la tarde.
It was three o'clock in the afternoon.

Tenía cinco años.
She was five years old.

4) Expresar condiciones mentales, físicas y emocionales en el pasado

Eduardo se sentía mal.
Eduardo was feeling badly.

Ask yourself, does it describe the way things were or does it tell what happened?
What happened (action)—pretérito; The way things were (description)—imperfecto

Think of yourself as a director of a movie. You want to set up the scene and background description before you start the action. Whatever continues through your scene before the action starts, with no reference to its beginning or ending, is imperfect, the actions that occur relative to it, that start and finish, are preterit. Also, a specific point in time, the starting or ending points of an action are also preterit.

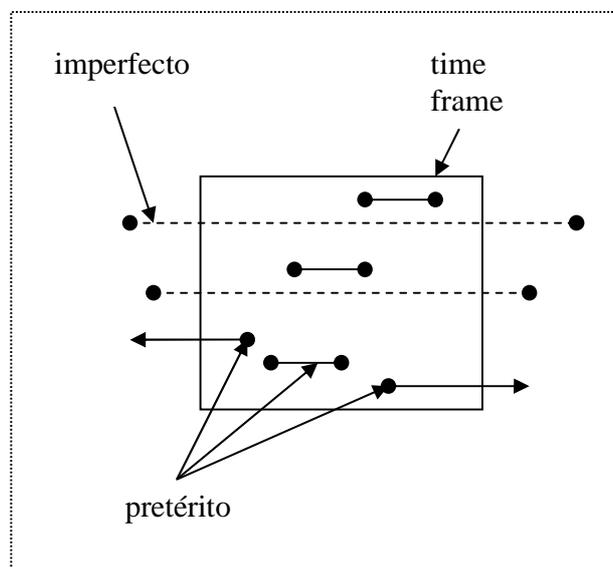
Before you start filming, you want things to be going on already: Era de día, los pájaros cantaban, la gente caminaba por las calles...

It was daytime, the birds were singing, people were walking along the streets...

Then you start the action: escuché un ruido, di la vuelta y vi un perro enorme...

I heard a noise, turned around, and saw a huge dog...

Everything's relative to the time frame you choose which can constantly change—it could be a matter of seconds or could encompass years. When one action occurs completely relative to another, the completed action is preterit while the ongoing one is imperfect. The preterit and the imperfect are often used together, in no predetermined order, to create suspense (imperfect—description) or move the action along (preterit—action or movement). Remember being the director, the storyteller, a good story uses both to captivate the listener and lead them through the past.



Aterrizaron en México, era de noche y estaban cansados, pero bajaron del avión animados por su viaje.

They landed in Mexico (action, ending point of flying), it was nighttime (description, no reference to when night fell) and they were tired (also the start and end points to being tired aren't part of the time frame), but they got off the plane (action started and ending during the time frame) excited for their trip.