Spanish has two ways to talk about the past because sometimes we talk about **events**, and sometimes we talk about **background, habits, or ongoing situations**. The imperfect is the tense Spanish uses when the past wasn't a single event — it was something happening, repeating, or describing.

The preterite = a photo

A single moment. A completed event.

The imperfect = a video

Something happening over time. Background. Habit. Description.

English actually has this distinction too — we just don't mark it with a special tense. When we say *I was walking*, *I used to walk*, *I would walk*, or *I walked every day*, English uses different constructions to express ongoing or habitual past. Spanish bundles all of those ideas into one tense: **the imperfect**."

The imperfect is not a mood. It's a **tense** inside the **indicative mood** — the mood for real events.

The imperfect is for:

1. **Background** (setting the scene) *It was cold. The street was empty.*

2. **Ongoing past** (something happening) *I was reading. She was cooking.*

3. **Habitual past** (used to / would) *We used to go. He would visit every summer.*

The Imperfect is:

1. A description of the situation

This is when you're *painting the scene* — what things were like.

- *La calle estaba vacía*. "The street was empty."

It's **describing the situation**.

2. An action in progress

This is the "middle of the movie" feeling.

- *Ella estudiaba*. "She was studying."

It's **an action happening at that moment**.

3. A repeated or habitual past action

Something that happened regularly.

- *Siempre tomábamos café juntos.* "We always used to drink coffee together."

It's **a pattern**.

4. An ongoing state

Feelings, conditions, mental states.

- *Me sentía mal.* "I was feeling sick."

It's **a state that continued for a while**.

Preterite	Imperfect
completed event	ongoing situation
one moment	background
what happened	what was happening
photo	video

English uses *was/were + -ing*, *used to*, and *would* to express the same ideas the imperfect expresses. Spanish just uses one tense instead of three constructions.

10 Preterite vs. Imperfect Pairs

1.

Ayer llovió. *It rained yesterday.*

Ayer llovía. *It was raining yesterday.*

2.

Entré en la casa. *I entered the house.*

Entraba en la casa. *I was entering the house.*

3.

Vi a mi vecino. *I saw my neighbor.*

Veía a mi vecino. *I used to see my neighbor / I was seeing my neighbor.*

4.

Empezó la película. *The movie started.*

Empezaba la película. *The movie was starting.*

5.

Vivimos en México por un año. *We lived in Mexico for one year.*

Vivíamos en México. *We used to live in Mexico / We were living in Mexico.*

6.

Me desperté a las seis. *I woke up at six.*

Me despertaba a las seis. *I used to wake up at six / I would wake up at six.*

7.

Ella cocinó la cena. *She cooked dinner.*

Ella cocinaba la cena. *She was cooking dinner.*

8.

Los niños jugaron en el parque. *The kids played in the park.*

Los niños jugaban en el parque. *The kids were playing in the park / The kids used to play in the park.*

9.

Tuvimos una reunión. *We had a meeting.*

Teníamos reuniones los lunes. *We used to have meetings on Mondays.*

10.

Me sentí mal anoche. *I felt sick last night.*

Me sentía mal. *I was feeling sick.*

30 Sentences (Identify the Tense)

1. Ayer comí con mi hermana.

2. Cuando era niño, vivía en Texas.

3. El sábado pasado limpié toda la casa.

4. Siempre tomábamos café juntos.

5. Anoche vi una película.

6. Hacía frío esta mañana.

7. El profesor llegó tarde.

8. Los niños jugaban en el patio.

9. Fui al supermercado después del trabajo.

10. Ella leía todos los días antes de dormir.

11. Conocí a tu amigo en la fiesta.

12. Mi abuelo contaba historias largas.

13. Escribí tres correos esta mañana.

14. Caminábamos por el parque cada domingo.

15. El concierto empezó a las ocho.

16. La calle estaba vacía.

17. Compré un coche nuevo el año pasado.

18. Siempre me despertaba temprano.

19. Tomé un taxi al aeropuerto.

20. Ella estudiaba cuando la llamé.

21. Abrí la ventana porque hacía calor.

22. De niño, veía muchos dibujos animados.

23. Salimos del restaurante a las nueve.

24. Mi mamá cocinaba mientras yo ponía la mesa.

25. **Recibí tu mensaje ayer.**

26. **Mis amigos viajaban mucho antes.**

27. **Terminé el proyecto anoche.**

28. **El cielo estaba muy oscuro.**

29. **Viví en Chile por seis meses.**

30. **Ella trabajaba en una librería.**

Answer Key With Explanations

1. **Preterite** — a completed event ("ate once yesterday").

2. **Imperfect** — background about childhood ("was living").

3. **Preterite** — a one-time completed action ("cleaned the whole house").

4. **Imperfect** — habitual past ("we always used to drink coffee").

5. **Preterite** — a single completed event ("watched a movie").

6. **Imperfect** — background description ("it was cold").

7. **Preterite** — a completed arrival ("arrived late").

8. **Imperfect** — ongoing action ("were playing").

9. **Preterite** — a completed trip ("went to the supermarket").

10. **Imperfect** — habitual action ("she used to read every day").

11. **Preterite** — a single moment of meeting ("met").

12. **Imperfect** — repeated/habitual storytelling ("used to tell").

13. **Preterite** — completed tasks ("wrote three emails").

14. **Imperfect** — habitual past ("we walked every Sunday").

15. **Preterite** — a definite start point ("the concert began").

16. **Imperfect** — background description ("the street was empty").

17. **Preterite** — a completed purchase ("bought a car").

18. **Imperfect** — habitual past ("used to wake up early").

19. **Preterite** — a completed action ("took a taxi").

20. **Imperfect** — ongoing action in progress ("was studying").

21. **Preterite** — completed action ("opened the window").

22. **Imperfect** — habitual childhood action ("used to watch cartoons").

23. **Preterite** — completed departure ("we left at nine").

24. **Imperfect** — simultaneous ongoing actions ("was cooking / was setting the table").

25. **Preterite** — completed event ("received your message").

26. **Imperfect** — habitual past ("they used to travel a lot").

27. **Preterite** — completed action ("finished the project").

28. **Imperfect** — background description ("the sky was dark").

29. **Preterite** — lived for a defined time period ("lived for six months").

30. **Imperfect** — ongoing past state ("she was working / used to work").