

Imperfect Tense – Comparisons with Past Tense

Remember -- Duration does NOT decide the tense. Completion does.

- **Preterite** = the speaker sees the action as a **whole**, a **finished package**, a **box** (even if it took hours)
- **Imperfect** = the speaker is focusing on the **middle**, the **process**, the **ongoingness**, the **background** (not whether it finished)

So:

- **Limpié toda la casa.** → I cleaned the whole house. → A completed task, a “box,” even if it took 3 hours.
- **Limpiaba la casa.** → I was cleaning the house. → Focus on the process, not the finish.

10 Long-Duration Actions That Are Still Preterite

1.

Fui de viaje por dos semanas. *I went on a trip for two weeks.* → **Preterite** because it's one completed experience, a single “box.”

2.

Viví en Madrid por un año. *I lived in Madrid for one year.* → **Preterite** because the time period is closed and finished.

3.

Trabajé en esa empresa por cinco años. *I worked at that company for five years.* → **Preterite** because the job ended; it's a completed chapter.

4.

Estudié toda la tarde. *I studied all afternoon.* → **Preterite** because the studying is viewed as one completed block.

5.

Limpié toda la casa. *I cleaned the whole house.* → **Preterite** because the task was finished — checkmark, not process.

6.

Leí el libro en tres días. *I read the book in three days.* → **Preterite** because the book was completed.

7.

Caminé por la ciudad por horas. *I walked around the city for hours.* → **Preterite** because the walk is treated as one finished outing.

8.

Dormí ocho horas anoche. *I slept eight hours last night.* → **Preterite** because the sleep is a completed block of time.

9.

Esperé en la fila por una hora. *I waited in line for an hour.* → **Preterite** because the waiting ended; it's a completed event.

10.

Cociné toda la mañana. *I cooked all morning.* → **Preterite** because the cooking session is viewed as one finished activity.

Comparing Preterite with Imperfect

1. Trip

Preterite: *Fui de viaje por dos semanas.* *I went on a trip for two weeks.* → Completed experience.

Imperfect: *Iba de viaje por dos semanas.* *I was going on a trip for two weeks.* → Focus on the process or background, not the completion.

2. Living somewhere

Preterite: *Viví en Madrid por un año.* *I lived in Madrid for one year.* → Closed chapter.

Imperfect: *Vivía en Madrid.* *I was living / used to live in Madrid.* → Ongoing state, no defined endpoint.

3. Working somewhere

Preterite: *Trabajé en esa empresa por cinco años. I worked at that company for five years.*
→ Finished period.

Imperfect: *Trabajaba en esa empresa. I was working / used to work at that company.* →
Background or habitual past.

4. Studying

Preterite: *Estudié toda la tarde. I studied all afternoon.* → One completed study session.

Imperfect: *Estudiaba toda la tarde. I was studying all afternoon.* → Focus on the middle of
the action.

5. Cleaning

Preterite: *Limpié toda la casa. I cleaned the whole house.* → Completed task.

Imperfect: *Limpiaba la casa. I was cleaning the house.* → Ongoing action in progress.

6. Reading a book

Preterite: *Leí el libro en tres días. I read the book in three days.* → Finished the book.

Imperfect: *Leía el libro. I was reading the book / used to read the book.* → Process, not
completion.

7. Walking around

Preterite: *Caminé por la ciudad por horas. I walked around the city for hours.* → One
completed outing.

Imperfect: *Caminaba por la ciudad. I was walking around the city.* → Ongoing action.

8. Sleeping

Preterite: *Dormí ocho horas anoche. I slept eight hours last night.* → Completed block of sleep.

Imperfect: *Dormía ocho horas cada noche. I used to sleep eight hours every night.* → Habitual past.

9. Waiting

Preterite: *Esperé en la fila por una hora. I waited in line for an hour.* → Completed wait.

Imperfect: *Esperaba en la fila. I was waiting in line.* → Action in progress.

10. Cooking

Preterite: *Cociné toda la mañana. I cooked all morning.* → One completed cooking session.

Imperfect: *Cocinaba toda la mañana. I was cooking all morning.* → Focus on the ongoing activity.