PRETERITE PAST VS IMPERFECT PAST TENSES

(This is an advanced lesson so we'll presume that you already know how to conjugate verbs in the preterite and imperfect tenses.)

The preterite and imperfect are both simple (one-word) tenses indicating an action or state in the past, but they have quite different meanings and implications.

This can be quite confusing because in English we are able to use the preterite (or simple) past to speak about actions that:

1. were 'one time' occurrences completed at a certain point in the past - I bought a pair of shoes yesterday.

2. were part of a series of events - I read a book, ate a biscuit, and went for a walk.

3. went on for a certain amount of time - The movie lasted for two hours.

4. happened frequently - When I was little we always went to the beach.

... and to

5. describe things, people and settings - It was a dark night, the air was cold, and the man was tall.

In Spanish, however, you can only use the preterite tense for numbers 1-3 above. To describe a setting or situation or to describe actions that happened frequently (unless you specifically state the number of occurrences) you need the imperfect tense.

To help us understand how to use these two tenses it might help to view time as a pedestrian crossing complete with red and green ‘stop’ and ‘go’ lights.
The red 'stop' man is like the preterite tense. It stops a past action or state at a certain point in time or views it as completed.

For instance to say ‘I ate an apple’ you would use the preterite. It’s as if the red stop man has frozen the complete action into a moment. The apple has been eaten.

**Comí (pret) una manzana.** I ate an apple.

The green 'go' man is like the imperfect tense. It allows the past action or state to keep going, to be in a state of progress.

So, to say ‘I was eating an apple’ to describe the action while it is actually in progress, you would use the imperfect tense. Here you can picture the action as it is happening, the apple is still being eaten at this moment.

**Yo comía (imp) una manzana.** I was eating an apple.
Now lets look at some uses of each tense. We'll start with the preterite, the red 'stop' man.

Use the preterite to present an action or state as completed, instantaneous or as being a 'one time' action:

*Tip: If the sentence includes a time expression, even a long one, which limits the action to a period of time, (e.g. last year, yesterday, two thousand years ago, on Saturday night, at three o’clock etc.), often that is an indication that the action is being viewed as completed and suggests the preterite.*

Bailé toda la noche. I danced all night.

Ayer comí una manzana. Yesterday I ate an apple.

De repente, el muchacho miró hacia arriba. Suddenly, the boy looked up.

Leí aquel libro una vez. I read that book once.

You may not even specifically mention the time, but you still use the preterite if you are referring to a completed event, action, or state.

Comí una manzana. I ate an apple.

(I ate it, it’s all gone, the action is over!)

Ví a mi mamá. I saw my mum.

(I saw her through the crowd but then she was gone. That action is finished, firmly in the past.)

¿Quién rompió la jarra? Who broke the jug?

Hablé con mi profesora. I spoke with my teacher.

(Thank goodness that’s over! I spoke to her and then got out of there as quickly as possible!)
Hice mi tarea. I did my homework.

(Yes I did! It’s all done, end of story. I’m not doing it any more. I don’t have to, it’s done.)

Pasó una semana. A week went by.

(Yes, it was a whole week but it’s completed. We’ve moved on.)

El chico estuvo enfermo. The boy was sick (but now he’s not).

**Use the Preterite for: Changes in Mental State or Feelings**

This is often expressed with the Spanish reflexive form and it is like the English ‘to get’ or ‘to become’ + an adjective.

Me enfermé. I got sick.

Se enteró del error. He found out about the error.

Se puso enojado con el árbitro. He got mad with the referee.

**Use the Preterite: To List Sequential Actions in the Past**

Jugué un poco, fui a la casa de mi amiga y luego volví a casa.

I played a bit, went to my friend's house, and then returned home.

**Use the Preterite: To focus on the beginning or end of an action or state in the past or to indicate a change in a past state**

Se puso enfermo. He got sick.

Se enfrió la sopa. The soup got cold.
Now let’s picture that green ‘go’ man – he’s the man of action. Things are always moving when he’s on the job.

He represents the imperfect tense which allows you to view past actions while they are still in progress. It’s a bit like shifting a present tense action back into the past.

**Use the Imperfect for: Actions in Progress in the Past**

To express actions in progress in the past in English we often use ‘was/were’ + –ing. I was eating, they were sleeping, etc. In Spanish the imperfect tense is used to express this.

Adding words such as ‘while’ or ‘as’ really help you to see the action still in motion: As she opened (was opening) the door ….. Mientras ella abría la puerta …..

Past actions which are still in progress, expressed by the imperfect tense, are often interrupted by another action that happens a bit more suddenly, and that second action would be expressed with the preterite tense. For this reason it's common to find both tenses in the same sentence:

Mientras ella abría la puerta el ratón entró corriendo.

While she opened (was opening) the door the mouse ran in.

Caminaban por el bosque cuando empezó a llover.

They were walking through the forest when it began to rain.

El niño se bañaba cuando llegaste.

The boy was having a bath/shower when you arrived.
Use the Imperfect for: Descriptions & Background Info

The imperfect is used to describe what a person, thing, or situation was like in the past. The imperfect gives information that 'sets the stage' for the principal action, such as; the time of the day, the date, the weather and the age of things.

Eran las once de la noche, había una tormenta terrible, y teníamos miedo.

It was eleven o clock at night, there was a terrible storm, and we were scared.

Mi tía era baja y severa, tenía 60 años, y trabajaba sin fin.

My aunty was short and stern. She was 60 and worked constantly.

Era un día muy bonito, no hacía calor y había una brisa muy fresca.

It was a very nice day. It wasn't hot and there was a very fresh breeze.

Use the Imperfect for: Simultaneous Actions in the Past

Mientras cocinaban, hablaban de las vacaciones.

While they were cooking they talked (or were talking) about the holidays.

Use the Imperfect for: Habitual Past Actions

When you want to refer to habitual past actions in situations that could be expressed with "used to" or "would" in English (e.g. I used to play squash; we would often meet for lunch) use the imperfect in Spanish.
Yo jugaba tenis cada fin de semana cuando era niño.
I used to play tennis every weekend when I was a child.

Siempre hacíamos excursiones en bicicleta.
We would always go for bike rides.

Cuando era niño, siempre íbamos a Nueva Zelanda.
When I was a child we always went to New Zealand.

*But note that if you specify the exact number of times that the habitual action took place then you would use the preterite tense:*

*Cuando era niño, fuimos diez veces a Nueva Zelanda.*

*When I was a boy, we went to New Zealand 10 times.*

**Use the Imperfect for: Mental States of Mind & Physical States or Feelings in progress**

Estaban muy enojados. They were very angry.

Yo no me sentía bien. I didn't feel well.

Yo me sentía mal. I felt sick.

Creíamos que estábamos perdidos. We thought that we were lost.

No sabíamos quién era. We didn't know who it was.

El chico estaba enfermo. The boy was sick.

Todos estábamos preocupados por el examen: Pablo sudaba, María repasaba su tarea y Alejandro no podía dejar de hablar.

We were all nervous about the exam: Paul was sweating, Maria was reviewing her homework, and Alexander couldn't stop talking.
If, however, you’re referring to a mental or physical state or a feeling that changes at the moment that you’re referring to, you would use the preterite.

This is the difference between:

*Yo estaba enojada.* I was angry (an ongoing state) and

*Me puse enojada.* I got angry (a change in state or feelings).

Another example of this, when the emotional state is expressed as an event rather than a background, would be:

*Al ver la injusticia, me enojé.*

When I saw the injustice, I became angry.

**Could either tense work in some situations?**

Sure, often you can use either the preterite or the imperfect to make perfect sense when describing something in the past. All you are doing is changing the perspective of how you are viewing it.

Eg. Using the imperfect: *Hacía sol cuando llegamos.* (imp) It was sunny when we arrived.

This tense shows that it didn't become sunny as you arrived - it already was, it was an ongoing condition and we're not worrying about when it began or ended.

Now using the preterite: *Hizo sol la semana pasada.* (pret) It was sunny last week.

Here, you’re viewing the state or action as having been completed at some stage. It’s as if you are staying where you are but looking back to see the week, neatly packaged up and firmly in the past. Sure, it was sunny then, but that’s over now, things have changed.
Differences in Meaning:

Let’s take a look at some more examples of when the choice between the preterite or the imperfect will convey a different meaning.

In some cases two distinct English verbs are be needed to express what can be conveyed by the use of the preterite and imperfect in Spanish. Remember that the preterite often refers to the beginning or ending of an action and the imperfect refers to an ongoing condition. For example:

**Querer** in the preterite means ‘tried’; in the imperfect it means ‘wanted’.

Quería ir a la fiesta. I wanted to go to the party.

Quise ir a la fiesta. I tried to go to the party.

**No querer** in the preterite means ‘refused’; the imperfect means ‘didn’t want’.

No quería ir a la fiesta. I didn’t want to go to the party.

No quise ir a la fiesta. I refused to go to the party.

**Poder** in the preterite means ‘succeeded’; the imperfect means ‘was able to’.

Pude hacerlo. I could (and did) do it.

Podría hacerlo. I could do it (I had the ability to).

No pude hacerlo. I couldn’t (and failed to) do it.

No podría hacerlo. I couldn’t do it (didn’t have the ability).
Tener in the preterite means ‘received’; the imperfect means ‘used to have’.

Tuvo una carta ayer. I got a letter yesterday.

Tenía un perro. I used to have a dog.

and there’s also a difference in meaning when using the phrase ‘tener que’ in either the preterite or the imperfect

Tuve que ir a la escuela. I had to go to school.

Tenía que ir a la escuela. I was supposed to go to school.

Conocer in the preterite means ‘met’; the imperfect means ‘knew’.


Saber in the preterite means ‘to find out’; the imperfect means ‘knew’.

Maria supo las noticias y se enojó.

Maria found out about the news and she got mad.

Juan sabía las noticias y estaba enojado.

Juan knew about the news and was angry.

In other situations, using other verbs, the speaker may also use either the preterite or the imperfect but again the meaning will change slightly.

Estuvo en la fiesta a las 9:00. I got to the party at 9 o’ clock.

Estaba en la fiesta a las diez. I was at the party at ten o’ clock (I got there at 9 and at 10 I was still there).