

## **Preterite vs Imperfect: Two Aspects of the Past Tense**

Both the preterite and the imperfect are used to narrate in the past. The difference is in the aspect of the past which they are responsible for describing. The preterite is used to describe punctual events. That means actions or states that are described as specific points in time in the past. The imperfect is used to describe states and ongoing activities in the past.

### **THE PRETERITE**

The preterite describes **what happened**. The speaker is trying to communicate to his/her listener that these events began and/or ended in the past.

#### **I. a single instantaneous event or action**

Cerré la puerta.    ¿Oíste ese ruido?  
*I closed the door.*    *Did you hear that noise?*

Me puse la camiseta.     \*Empecé a llorar.  
*I put on the t-shirt.*     *I began to cry*

\* While the activity may be continuous after it begins, the moment it begins is an instantaneous event.

#### **II. an activity or state of limited duration**

Leímos el libro por veinte minutos.                              *We read the book for 20 minutes.*

Estuve enferma ayer, pero hoy  
me siento mejor.    *I was sick yesterday, but today I feel  
better.*

De niño, vivió en España.    *As a boy, he lived in Spain (but now he doesn't).*

Andaba de compras hasta que se me acabó el dinero.      *I was shopping until I ran out of money.*

Asistió a la universidad desde 1986  
hasta 1990.    *She attended the university from 1986 until 1990.*

En ese momento, pensó que iba a  
morir.    *At that moment, he thought that he was going to die*

#### **III. an action repeated a specific number of times**

Me llamó cinco veces.    *He called me five times.*

Este hombre ganó las elecciones  
en 1992 y en 1996.    *This man won the election in 1992 and 1996*