The Preterite Tense

The preterite tense allows you to refer to specific past actions performed (1) at a fixed point in time, (2) a specific number of times, or (3) during an enclosed amount of time.

The key is the quantitative nature of the action. If the action is in the past and you can pin-point it as to when or how many times it occurred, you will use the preterite tense. It is as though there were a frame or box around the action. Consider the following sentences:

Fixed point in time:
   I called you at 3:00.
   He bought the car on Tuesday afternoon.
   We saw the movie last night.

Specific number of actions:
   I called you five times.
   They ate ten sandwiches.
   She read the book twice.

Enclosed amount of time:
   I worked for eight hours.
   The movie lasted two and a half hours.
   He lived there for two years.

In each of the preceding sentences, the action’s time is specific, measured in some way, either by the clock, the calendar, or number of times the action occurred.

It is important to remember that while an obvious feature of the preterite tense is how it quantifies action, we do not always state the quantity of our actions. When the quantity is not stated, it is generally implied. Consider these sentences:

1. I went to John’s party.
2. We ate at McDonald’s.
3. The meeting was boring.
In the first two sentences, the implication is that the person performed the action once. In the third, the implication is that the entire meeting, from beginning to end, was boring.

A good test for determining if a sentence is in the preterite is to consider if it is reasonable to ask "For how long?" or "When?" the action took place.

For example, if someone tells you, “John called me,” you can reasonably ask, “When?” and expect a specific answer. But if this person says, “John used to call me several times a day,” you probably would be wasting your time if you asked when.

In other words, “John called me” is in the preterite, while “John used to call me several times a day” is not (this latter sentence is in the imperfect tense, which will be discussed in the next unit).

**Regular Verbs in the Preterite**

To form regular verbs in the preterite you do the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>-ar verbs: drop the -ar and add the following endings:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-é</td>
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<tr>
<td>-aste</td>
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<tr>
<td>-ió</td>
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</table>

Note that the nosotros form is identical in the preterite and the present tenses for -ar verbs.

**Examples:**

- **Yo hablé.**
  I spoke.

- **Hablamos con Juan.**
  We spoke with John.

- **Tú miraste la película.**
  You watched the movie.

- **Vosotros comprasteis palomitas.**
  You bought popcorn.

- **Ella me llamó tres veces.**
  She called me three times.

- **Ellos contaron el dinero.**
  They counted the money.

**-er and -ir verbs: drop the -er or -ir and add the following endings:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>-i</th>
<th>-imos</th>
<th>(I ate, you ate, etc.)</th>
<th>(I opened, you opened, etc.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-iste</td>
<td>-isteis</td>
<td>yo comí</td>
<td>nosotros comimos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ió</td>
<td>-ieron</td>
<td>él comió</td>
<td>ellos comieron</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Most stem-changing verbs change only in the present tense (not in the preterite), e.g., contar (to count): yo cuento (I count); yo conté (I counted). The exceptions to this are -ir stem-changing verbs, and are discussed under irregular verbs, on page 88.

**Examples:**

- **Escribi una carta.**
  I wrote a letter.

- **Comimos pizza.**
  We ate pizza.
Vendiste tu casa. You sold your house.
Rompisteis las ventanas. You broke the windows.

Ella bebió tres vasos de leche. She drank three glasses of milk.
Ellos abrieron las cajas. They opened the boxes.

Before working with the preterite, it is important to be familiar with the more common preterite "markers," or words and phrases that indicate specific time frames. Several are listed below.

ayer yesterday
anoche last night
esta mañana this morning
esta tarde this afternoon
la semana pasada last week
el mes (año) pasado last month (year)
hace ______ ago
ayer por la mañana/tarde yesterday morning/afternoon

Para ti, ¿cuál es verdadero o falso?

_____ 1. Hablé por teléfono ayer por la tarde.
_____ 2. Comí una ensalada anoche.
_____ 3. Abrió las ventanas en mi casa hace dos horas.
_____ 5. Bebí jugo de naranja esta mañana.
_____ 6. Asistí a la escuela la semana pasada.
_____ 7. Compré un coche el año pasado.
_____ 8. Vendí mi casa el mes pasado.

ejercicio 1-1-1

1. I bought a shirt yesterday.
2. You studied last night.
3. She worked for two hours.
4. We washed the dishes.
5. They sang five songs.
6. I ran to the corner.
7. You wrote a letter.
8. She opened the door.
9. We didn’t open those windows.
10. They sold the car. ________________________________

11. We danced the tango last night. ________________________________

12. They spoke with the owner. ________________________________

13. I took a shower this morning. ________________________________

14. You washed your hair. ________________________________

15. They went to bed at eleven-thirty. ________________________________

¿Te toca a ti!
Responde, con frases completas, a las siguientes preguntas:

1. ¿Hablaste por teléfono anoche? ________________________________

2. ¿Dónde te compraste la camisa? ________________________________

3. ¿Qué comiste anoche? ________________________________

4. ¿Qué recibiste para tu último cumpleaños? ________________________________

5. ¿Escuchaste la radio hoy? ________________________________

6. ¿Tomaste café ayer por la mañana? ________________________________

7. ¿Bailaste el fin de semana pasado? ________________________________

8. ¿Estudias español el año pasado? ________________________________

Orthographic Changes in Regular Verbs

There are three standard orthographic (spelling) changes in Spanish which affect verbs in the preterite as well as in other tenses. In the preterite, these changes occur only in the first person singular yo form. They are as follows:

1. verbs ending in -gar: insert a u before the e: yo llegué (I arrived)

2. verbs ending in -car: the c changes to qu before the letter e: yo practiqué (I practiced)

3. verbs ending in -zar: the z changes to c before the letter e: yo empecé (I began)

The reason for the first two changes is phonetic: in order to retain the original hard g and c sounds, the letter u is inserted (the letters g and c are soft before the vowels e and i). In the last change it is because the letter z never directly precedes the letter e in Spanish (except in rare cases when ze are the first two letters of a word).

Some frequently used verbs in these categories, with the preterite yo form:

- llegar  to arrive  yo llegué
- jugar  to play (a game)  yo jugué
The Preterite Tense

- **pagar** to pay (for) - yo pagué
- **regar** to water (a plant) - yo regué
- **segar** to mow (grass, etc.) - yo segué
- **tragar** to swallow - yo trague
- **vagar** to wander - yo vague
- **aparcar** to park - yo aparqué
- **buscar** to look for, search - yo busqué
- **clarificar** to clarify - yo clariqué
- **clasificar** to classify - yo clasifique
- **destacar** to stand out - yo destacé
- **empacar** to pack - yo empaque
- **justificar** to justify - yo justifique
- **practicar** to practice - yo practiqué
- **sacar** to take out, take a picture - yo saqué
- **tocar** to touch, play (an instrument) - yo toqué
- **autorizar** to authorize - yo autoricé
- **comenzar** to commence, begin - yo comenzé
- **empezar** to begin - yo empecé
- **organizar** to organize - yo organicé
- **rezar** to pray - yo recé
- **simbolizar** to symbolize - yo simbolicé
- **trazar** to trace - yo tracé
- **tropezarse (con)** to bump (into) - yo me tropecé

Remember: Only verbs in the yo form are affected by these orthographic changes.

### ejercicío II-I-2

1. I practiced the piano for an hour. ____________________________
2. I arrived at two o’clock. ____________________________
3. I organized the party. ____________________________
4. I began to dance on the table. ____________________________
5. I played the guitar for two hours at the reception. ____________________________
6. I played tennis with the pro (el jugador profesional). ____________________________
7. I took twenty pictures of my cat. ____________________________
8. I authorized the purchase. ____________________________
9. I classified the information. ____________________________
10. I bumped into your house’s step (el pezlaño).

11. I parked the car in a prohibited space. 

12. I never stood out in English for my pronunciation.

13. I swallowed the medicine without thinking.


15. I watered my friend Lola’s plants.

Final note: While these three types of verbs do not exactly follow the regular pattern of forming the preterite tense, they are still considered regular verbs in the preterite because these changes occur at all times in all tenses.

**Irregular Verbs in the Preterite**

There are several irregular verbs in the preterite. While patterns do emerge and the endings are similar, it is important to understand the various types of conjugations.

The following eleven verbs all take this set of endings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>-e</th>
<th>-imos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-iste</td>
<td>-isteis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-o</td>
<td>-ieron</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. andar to walk
2. estar to be
3. tener to have
4. caber to fit
5. haber auxiliary, to have
6. poder to be able to
7. poner to put, place
8. saber to know
9. hacer to make, do
10. querer to want
11. venir to come

Note:
1. Verbs 1–3 take the letter uv in the new stem; 4–8 take a u; and 9–11 take an i.
2. The only exception above is the third person singular of hacer, which is hizo. (The e changes to z to avoid the k sound.)
3. There are no accent marks on these irregular endings.
4. For their full conjugations, consult the preterite verb chart in the appendix.
Para ti, ¿cuál es verdadero o falso?

____  1. Tuve una fiesta hace dos semanas.
____  2. Anduve a la escuela esta mañana.
____  3. Anoche no pude dormir.
____  4. No hice nada ayer.
____  5. Alguien vino a mi casa el fin de semana pasado.
____  6. Puse los zapatos en el armario anoche.
____  7. Estuve increíblemente enfermo/a ayer.
____  8. Anduve al cine esta semana.

ejercicio II-1-3

1. I walked to the store. ___________________________________________

2. He came to my party. __________________________________________

3. Last night I couldn’t sleep. _____________________________________

4. They had an accident last Tuesday. ______________________________

5. We made the beds this morning. _________________________________

6. When did you know (find out) the answer? _______________________

7. You (pl. fam.) were here for no more than ten minutes. _____________

8. I put the clothes in the closet. ___________________________________

9. What did you do last night? _____________________________________

10. They had to work for ten hours yesterday. _________________________

11. I put on my shoes. _____________________________________________

12. We were there for half an hour. _________________________________

13. Who made these invitations? ________________________________

14. She didn’t come to the meeting because she had an accident. ________
15. I was in the store for twenty minutes and then I came here.

- I went to the game.
- I was president of the club for one year.
- He went to the store (in order) to buy eggs.
- Why did you go away?

¿Te toca a ti?
¿Qué hiciste ayer? List ten things that you did yesterday:

1. __________________________
2. __________________________
3. __________________________
4. __________________________
5. __________________________
6. __________________________
7. __________________________
8. __________________________
9. __________________________
10. __________________________

Ser and ir: The preterite conjugations for ser and ir are identical. But don’t worry, because the context will carry the desired meaning, and ser is used less often than ir in the preterite.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ser</th>
<th>ir</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(I was, you were, etc.)</td>
<td>(I went, you went, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fui</td>
<td>fuimos</td>
<td>fui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fuiste</td>
<td>fuisteis</td>
<td>fuiste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fue</td>
<td>fueron</td>
<td>fue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ejercicio** 11-11

1. I went to the game.
2. I was president of the club for one year.
3. He went to the store (in order) to buy eggs.
4. Why did you go away?
5. They didn’t go yesterday because they went last week.

6. We didn’t go to the wedding.

7. Did you (pl. fam.) go to school today?

8. Who was the big winner yesterday?

9. The party was terrible.

10. The meeting was/went well.

11. Anita and Pepe were boyfriend/girlfriend (novios) for two years, but they never went to Venice.

12. He was my best friend for ten years.

13. We went separately (por separado) to the same store.

14. Where did you (pl. form.) go last night?

15. How was the party? __________________

   It was a disaster!

**Decir and traer:** The verbs decir (to say, tell) and traer (to bring) are conjugated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>decir</th>
<th>traer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(I said/told, you said/told, etc.)</td>
<td>(I brought, you brought, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dije</td>
<td>traje</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dijiste</td>
<td>trajiste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dijo</td>
<td>trajo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Verbs related to, and conjugated in the same manner as traer:

- atraer to attract (atrage, etc.)
- distraer to distract (distrage, etc.)
- retraer to bring back, dissuade (retrage, etc.)
- sustraer to remove, take away (sustrage, etc.)