Pretérito e Imperfecto

Completed Actions - Preterite

The preterite is used to describe completed actions in the past:

Pasó una semana. - *A week went by.*
Hablé con el director. - *I spoke with the director.*
Hice mi tarea. - *I did my homework.*

Beginning or End of an Action - Preterite

Empecé a trabajar a las 8 de la mañana. *I started to work at 8 in the morning.*
Trabajé hasta las 4 de la tarde. *I worked until 4 in the afternoon.*

Beginning and End of an Action or Condition - Preterite

Trabajé desde las 8 hasta las 4. *I worked from 8 till 4.*
Viví en España por diez años. *I lived in Spain for 10 years.*
Estuve enferma ayer. *I was sick yesterday.*

Ongoing Past Actions - Imperfect

The imperfect is used for ongoing past actions. These actions tend to be interrupted by another action.

Caminaban por la calle cuando empezó a llover. *They were walking down the street when it began to rain.*
Juan se bañaba cuando llegaste. *Juan was taking a bath when you arrived.*

Background Information - Imperfect

The imperfect is used to give background information which sets the stage for the principal action:
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.*
Todos estábamos preocupados por el examen: Adolfo sudaba, Gabriel repasaba su tarea y Lupe no podía dejar de hablar. *We were all nervous about the exam: Adolfo was sweating, Gabriel was reviewing his homework, and Lupe couldn't stop talking.*

Simultaneous Actions - Imperfect

Simultaneous actions are expressed with the imperfect:

Mientras pescaban, hablaban del partido de fútbol. *While they were fishing they talked about the soccer game.*

Habitual Past Actions - Imperfect

When you want to refer to habitual past actions in situations that would require "used to" or "would" in English (e.g. I used to smoke; we would always meet at the arcade) 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.

Mental State or Feelings - Imperfect
If it is a verb which indicates a state of mind or feelings, rather than a change of state of mind, then use the imperfect:

Yo no me sentía bien. - *I didn't feel well.*
No sabíamos quien era. - We didn't know who it was.
Estaban muy enojados. - *They were very angry.*

Change in Mental State or Feelings - Preterite
Changes in one's mental state or feelings are expressed with the preterite. This is often expressed with the reflexive form and corresponds to "become + adjective" in English:

Me enfermé del estómago. - *I became sick to my stomach*.
Se enteró del error. - *He found out about the error.*
Te enojaste con el árbitro. - *You got mad at the referee.*

Verbs that change meaning if used in the Preterite or the Imperfect: There are some cases in which two distinct English verbs will be needed to express what can be conveyed by the use of the preterite and imperfect in Spanish. Remember that the preterite refers to the beginning or ending of an action and the imperfect refers to an ongoing condition.

For example:

	Pretérito	**Imperfecto**
Conocer	**To meet, to know for the first time** **Conocí** a Miguel en 1998. *I met Miguel in 1998.*	**Previously knew for some time** Yo **conocía** a Juan desde la escuela primaria. *I knew Juan since elementary school.*
Saber	**Learned, found out at a specific point** Juan **supo** que su madre estaba enferma cuando su padre se lo dijo. *Juan found out his mother was ill when his father told him.*	**Had knowledge (or not) for some time** Juan **no sabía** que su madre estaba enferma. *Juan did not know his mother was ill.*
Poder	**Managed to; to Succeed (or failed to, if negative)** **Pude** dormir a pesar del ruido de la fiesta. *I managed to sleep (action takes place) in spite of the noise from the party.*	**Could, had the ability to** **Podía** hacerlo pero no tenía ganas. *I was able to (had the ability to) do it, but I didn't feel like it.*

	Tried to (or refused if negative)	Wanted, had the intention to
Querer / No querer	El vendedor **quiso** venderme seguros. *The salesman tried to sell me insurance (action takes place).* Me invitó al teatro pero **no quise** ir. (I said no) *She invited me to the theater, but I refused to go (action-saying no-takes place).*	El vendedor **quería** venderme seguros. *The salesman wanted to sell me insurance (mental state, no action implied).* Me invitó al teatro pero **no quería** ir. (did not feel like it) *She invited me to the theater, but I didn't want to go (ongoing mental state, no action implied).*
Tener que	**Fulfilled obligation** **Tuve que** ir a la junta. - *I had to go to the meeting.(and I went)*	**Had an obligation (not necessarily fulfilled)** **Tenía que** ir a la junta. - *I was supposed to go to the meeting.*
Haber	**Used for events** **Hubo** una fiesta en mi casa. *There was a party in my house (event)*	**Used for objects** or people **Había** mucha gente en la fiesta**.** *There were a lot of people in the party. (Description)*

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