

The Preterite in Spanish



¡Hola! This time we're talking about the past tense called the Preterite.

This Helpsheet is designed as not only a working document, but also as a valuable reference document, too. We expect that you'll return to it many times.

Without doubt you'll need to look at it a few times. It is absolutely normal. There's a lot of material to remember, so we'd advise you to divide it in chunks. Trust that you'll end up loving this tense once you get to know it! Give it time and give yourself time, too.

When do you use it?

The Preterite is the tense used for specific actions in the past, for a specific number of times or during a specific amount of time.



Actions in Preterite are completed.

If an action is specific and you can pinpoint in time when it happened or how many times it happened, it is very likely Preterite.

Actions in the Preterite are not ongoing.



Time references that are usually with Preterite

yesterday	ayer
last year	el año pasado
last week	la semana pasada
last month	el mes pasado
at that moment	en ese momento
the other day	el otro día
the day before yesterday	anteayer / antes de ayer
from the first time	desde el primer momento
two days <u>ago</u>	<u>hace</u> dos días
yesterday morning/afternoon/evening / night	ayer por la mañana / tarde / noche
this morning/afternoon/evening/tonight	esta mañana / tarde / noche
for days/weeks/months/years	durante días / semanas / meses / años

The line is a story in the past and the dots are actions in the Preterite.

_____ ● _____ ● _____ ● _____

For example: *While I was having lunch the postman came ● , Julia phoned twice ● , and Peter came ● .*

'*While I was having lunch*' is the story line (this is a past that we call *Imperfect*). The three dots of actions that were specific were: postman came, Julia phoned twice, and Peter came. These are actions in the Preterite.

⋮
EJEMPLO
DE LO
GENIAL
⋮

More examples:

I rang you at 7:30 → Specific point in time

I rang you three times → Specific number of times

I rang you for an hour → Specific time frame

Sometimes the time won't be specified in the sentence, but it will still be implied, as in:

We went to the park

This is not an ongoing action. It is a finished one that we could pinpoint in time by asking 'when, specifically?'



Ongoing vs Completed: Another Example

Look at this sentence. We have Preterite and *Imperfect* (ongoing past, which we'll look at soon). Can you spot the action in Preterite?

My ears were hurting before I put some eardrops in them

Which verb was the ongoing story _____ and which was Preterite ●?

Well, taking a closer look, you can see that:

My ears were hurting was ongoing _____ (Imperfect)

... and

I put some eardrops in them was completed ● (Preterite)

Conjugating regular verbs in Preterite

	-AR HABLAR	-ER COMER	-IR VIVIR
Yo	hablé	comí	viví
Tú	hablaste	comiste	viviste
Él /Ella	habló	comió	vivió
Nosotros	hablamos	comimos	vivimos
Vosotros	hablasteis	comisteis	vivisteis
Ellos	hablaron	comieron	vivieron



Exercise

Do you fancy practicing? ¡¡Buena suerte, chic@s!!
(Answers next page)

1. She opened the window.
2. Last week I didn't watch TV.
3. Did you speak with Felipe?
4. I waited for you ('I waited you') for thirty minutes!
5. Did he finally sell the house?
6. This morning I saw Patricia with her ex-boyfriend.
7. I bought this house five years ago.
8. Last night we danced and sang for hours.
9. Where did you all celebrate your birthday party?
10. You washed your hair.

Answers

1. (Ella) abrió la ventana.
2. La semana pasada (yo) no vi la televisión.
3. ¿Hablaste (tú) con Felipe?
4. ¡(Yo) te esperé durante treinta minutos!
5. ¿Vendió (él) la casa al final?
6. Esta mañana (yo) vi a Patricia con su ex novio.
7. (Yo) compré esta casa hace cinco años.
8. Anoche (nosotros) bailamos y cantamos durante horas.
9. ¿Dónde celebrasteis (vosotros) vuestra fiesta de cumpleaños?
10. (Tú) te lavaste el pelo.



Changes because of sound

In Spanish we like to keep the same sound as the original word when conjugating a verb. This means that we sometimes need to change a **c** for a **z** or a **que**, or **ag** for a **gu**, etc, to keep the same sound. Here are some changes to watch out for in the first person singular (**yo**) form.

G → GUÉ

The verb PAGAR (To Pay) has a soft 'g' (like in *gato*). If we break the verb down in Preterite it would be **Yo pagé**. This changes the sound from soft 'g' to strong 'g' (as in *gente*). For that reason, we need to put **gu** → **Yo pagué**. Here are a couple of other examples:

	<i>without spelling change</i>	<i>with spelling change</i>
LLEGAR	Yo llegé	Yo llegué
REGAR	Yo regé	Yo regué

C→QUÉ

The verb BUSCAR (To Look For) has a 'k' sound (like in *coco*). When we say 'I looked for' we need to change the 'c' for a 'qué' to keep the 'k' sound.

	<i>without spelling change</i>	<i>with spelling change</i>
APARCAR	Yo aparcé	Yo aparqué
PRACTICAR	Yo practicé	Yo practiqué

Z→CÉ

	<i>without spelling change</i>	<i>with spelling change</i>
COMENZAR	Yo comenzé	Yo comencé
EMPEZAR	Yo empezé	Yo empecé



Irregular verbs in Preterite

There's a grouping of verbs in Spanish that do a peculiar thing in the Preterite. Instead of using the regular Preterite endings, they change their stem and then share a common set of new endings for all three types of verbs (-AR, -ER, -IR). Here are the new endings:

Yo	-e	Nosotros	-imos
Tú	-iste	Vosotros	-isteis
Él/Ella/ Usted	-o	Ellos/Ellas/ Ustedes	-ieron

Verbs that conjugate in this way include:

		<i>new stem!</i>	
ANDAR	To Walk	Anduv-	Anduve, anduviste, anduvo...
ESTAR	To Be	Estuv-	Estuve, estuviste, estuvo...
TENER	To Have	Tuv-	Tuve, tuviste, tuvo...
CABER	To Fit	Cup-	Cupe, cupiste, cupo...
PODER	To Be Able To	Pud-	Pude, pudiste, pudo...
PONER	To Put	Pus-	Puse, pusiste, puso...
SABER	To Know	Sup-	Supe, supiste, supo...
HACER	To Do/Make	Hic-	Hice, hiciste, hizo ***
QUERER	To Want/Love	Quis-	Quise, quisiste, quiso...
VENIR	To Come	Vin-	Vine, viniste, vino...
HABER	To Have (done, eaten...)	Hub-	Hube, hubiste, hubo...

Exercise

Do you fancy a quick practice? ¡¡Buena suerte!!

(Answers next page)

1. He didn't come to my reception.
2. What did you do yesterday morning?
3. She didn't know what to say.
4. Where did you two put my glasses?
5. The machine didn't fit in my car.
6. Lisa could see her sister for an hour.
7. They walked to the beach.
8. Sofía didn't come to the meeting because she had an accident.
9. Once he had done it, he left.
10. I made my bed this morning.



Answers

1. (Él) no vino a mi recepción.
2. ¿Qué hiciste (tú) ayer por la mañana?
3. (Ella) no supo qué decir.
4. ¿Dónde pusisteis mis gafas vosotros dos?
5. La máquina no cupo en mi coche.
6. Lisa pudo ver a su hermana durante una hora.
7. (Ellos) anduvieron a la playa.
8. Sofía no vino a la reunión porque tuvo un accidente.
9. Una vez lo había hecho, se fue/ salió.
10. (Yo) hice mi cama esta mañana.

.....How did it go? ☺.....



Other Irregular Verbs

Here are some more common irregular verbs and their conjugations, starting with two common ones that look exactly the same in Preterite!

SER (To Be) & IR (To Go)

Yo	fui	Nosotros	fuimos
Tú	fuiste	Vosotros	fuisteis
Él/Ella/ Usted	fue	Ellos/Ellas/ Ustedes	fueron

	DECIR (To Say)	TRAER* (To Bring)
Yo	dije	traje
Tú	dijiste	trajiste
Él/Ella/Ud	dijo	trajo
Nosotros	dijimos	trajimos
Vosotros	dijisteis	trajisteis
Ellos/Ellas/Uds	dijeron	trajeron

**Other verbs like TRAER:*

ATRAER (To Attract)
 DISTRAER (To Distract)
 SUSTRAR (To Subtract,
 Take Away, Remove)

	DAR (To Give)	VER (To See)
Yo	di	vi
Tú	diste	viste
Él/Ella/Ud	dio	vio
Nosotros	dimos	vimos
Vosotros	disteis	visteis
Ellos/Ellas/Uds	dieron	vieron



-IR stem-changing verbs in Present

Some verbs that have spelling changes in their stems from **O → UE**, **E → IE**, and **E → I** in the *Present* tense will also have irregular spellings in the *Preterite* tense, but only in the third person singular (él / ella / usted) and plural (ellos / ellas / ustedes). Let's look at some examples...

Present: O → UE



Preterite: O → U

Present: E → IE



Preterite: E → I

DORMIR (To Sleep)

Yo	dormí
Tú	dormiste
Él/Ella/Ud	durmió
Nosotros	dormimos
Vosotros	dormisteis
Ellos/Ellas/Uds	durmieron

SENTIR(SE) (To Feel)

sentí
sentiste
sintió
sentimos
sentisteis
sintieron

similar verbs:

MORIR

(To Die)

ADVERTIR

(To Warn)

MENTIR

(To Lie)

PREFERIR

(To Prefer)

CONSEGUIR

(To Achieve)

	PEDIR (To Request / Ask For)
Yo	pedí
Tú	pediste
Él/Ella/Ud	pidió
Nosotros	pedimos
Vosotros	pedisteis
Ellos/Ellas/Uds	pidieron

Present: E → I



Preterite: E → I

similar verbs: **MEDIR** (To Measure)

REPETIR (To Repeat)

SEGUIR (To Follow, Continue)

SERVIR (To Serve)

Exercise

Time for a bit of practice! ¡¡Buena suerte!! 👍

1. At that moment they preferred not to say anything.
2. The doctor warned me of the side effects.
3. We asked for another coffee.
4. Estela repeated the same question five times.
5. They didn't lie to you.
6. I slept all night.
7. Did she sleep all night?
8. They asked for the bill.
9. I felt a hand on my shoulder.
10. His hamster died yesterday.



Answers

1. En ese momento (ellos) prefirieron no decir nada.
2. El médico me advirtió de los efectos secundarios.
3. (Nosotros) pedimos otro café.
4. Estela repitió la misma pregunta cinco veces.
5. (Ellos) no te mintieron.
6. (Yo) dormí toda la noche.
7. ¿Durmió (ella) toda la noche?
8. (Ellos) pidieron la cuenta.
9. (Yo) sentí una mano en mi hombro.
10. Su hámster murió ayer.



Verbs that change I → Y in Preterite (because of sound)

We substitute the **i** for a **y** in some conjugations so as to avoid having too many vowels and because the pronunciation is easier with a 'y' sound. This typically happens with verbs that already have double vowels.

	CREER (To Believe)
Yo	creí
Tú	creiste
Él/Ella/Ud	creyó
Nosotros	creímos
Vosotros	creísteis
Ellos/Ellas/Uds	creyeron

Preterite: I→Y

(Third person singular and plural only)

Some other verbs where the same rule applies:

CAER(To fall)
CAERSE(To fall down)
OÍR(To hear)
POSEER(To possess)
PROVEER(To provide)

Exceptions...

- Not applicable for the verb TRAER (to bring) which we saw before, nor any of its compound verbs (DISTRAR & ATRAER).
- Not applicable for verbs ending in –guir (DISTINGUIR, PERSEGUIR, etc), as the ‘u’ is not pronounced.
- Verbs ending in –uir (CONSTRUIR, DESTRUIR...) do make this change to ‘y’, but the accents appear on the first person singular (Yo) and third person (Él/Ella).

Therefore, –uir verbs where I → Y include:

	CONSTRUIR (To Build)
Yo	construí
Tú	construiste
Él/Ella/Ud	construyó
Nosotros	construimos
Vosotros	construisteis
Ellos/Ellas/Uds	construyeron

Similar verbs:

DESTRUIR (To Destroy)
FLUIR (To Flow)
CONTRIBUIR (To Contribute)
HUIR (To Flee)
INCLUIR (To Include)
INFLUIR (To Influence)



-DUCIR → -DUJ...

Finally, we have the basket of verbs that end in -ducir, which change the **c** to **aj** in the Preterite:

	CONDUCIR (To Drive)
Yo	conduje
Tú	condujiste
Él/Ella/Ud	condujo
Nosotros	condujimos
Vosotros	condujisteis
Ellos/Ellas/Uds	condujeron

Similar verbs:

PRODUCIR (To Produce)
DEDUCIR (To Deduce)
INDUCIR (To Induce)
INTRODUCIR (To Introduce)
REDUCIR (To Reduce)
TRADUCIR (To Translate)

Phew!! ¡Bien hecho! Éste es el final ☺

Ready for some more sentences to practise the last bits?

¡¡Buena suerte!! 👍



Exercise

1. She believed him when he said: 'I'm single'.
2. Did Pablo read that poem to his girlfriend?
3. Toni and Iván heard the bomb explode from their houses.
4. My father built a new house.
5. Her children didn't contribute to the house chores.
6. The thief fled the bank empty handed.
7. His opinion didn't influence her decision.
8. We drove for miles on Sunday.
9. Did you translate this document?
10. The supermarket reduced its costs by nearly half.

Answers

1. (Ella) le creyó cuando dijo: -Soy soltero-.
2. ¿Le leyó Pablo ese poema a su novia?
3. Toni e Iván oyeron la bomba explotar desde sus casas.
4. Mi padre construyó una casa nueva.
5. Sus hijos no contribuyeron con las tareas domésticas.
6. El ladrón huyó del banco con las manos vacías.
7. Su opinión no influyó en su decisión.
8. Condujimos durante/por millas el domingo.
9. ¿Tradujiste este documento?
10. El supermercado redujo sus costes a casi la mitad.

¡Buen trabajo!

You deserve a nice cup of tea with a biscuit! 👍



That's all for now. We hope that this has helped you in beginning to get to grips with the Preterite.

Of all the tenses in Spanish, this one is probably the most irregular. However, with use and plenty of revisits, you'll get there! Thanks for your focus, and see you in the next Helpsheet.



Gordon y Cynthia

[Lesson Link](http://www.lightspeedspanish.com)