

The imperfect tense

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Like the **passé composé**, the imperfect (**l'imparfait**) is a past tense. But unlike the **passé composé**, which denotes actions of limited (short or long) duration, the imperfect expresses actions and situations that lasted an indeterminate amount of time (*he had a lot of money*), occurred an unspecified number of times (*she went to church every Sunday*), or were in progress, often when something else happened (*it was raining [when they arrived]*). The main characteristic of the imperfect is the unlimited aspect. If you do not know at what specific time the action you are describing took place, or how long it lasted, you will generally use the imperfect.

The imperfect tense is translated into English by the past progressive form (*I was playing*), indicating an action that was going on, by *used to* + infinitive (*I used to play*) and *would* + infinitive (*I would play*), expressing a habitual past action, and by the simple past (*I played*), but only if the action was repeated, ongoing, or of unlimited duration.

A more detailed description of the use of the imperfect will follow the review of its formation.

The formation of the imperfect tense

The stem of the imperfect tense of all verbs (except *être*) is found by dropping the **-ons** ending from the **nous** form of the present tense. The imperfect endings are: **-ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient**. These endings are valid for all verbs, regular and irregular.

- A. To conjugate a regular **-er, -ir, or -re** ending verb in the imperfect tense, follow the models given below.

parler to speak

(nous parlons)

je parlais

tu parlais

il/elle/on parlait

nous parlions

vous parliez

ils/elles parlaient

I spoke, I was speaking, I used to speak

finir to finish

(nous finissons)

je finissais

tu finissais

il/elle/on finissait

I finished, I was finishing, I used to finish