

nous finissions
vous finissiez
ils/elles finissaient

entendre to hear

(nous entendons)

j'entendais

tu entendais

il/elle/on entendait

nous entendions

vous entendiez

ils/elles entendaient

I heard, I was hearing, I used to hear

Note:

- ◆ The endings **-ais**, **-ait**, and **-aient** have the same pronunciation. They are all pronounced [ɛ].
- ◆ Verbs ending in **-cer** have a **cédille** under the **c** in all persons of the imperfect except in the **nous** and **vous** forms to conserve the sound [s]. In these persons, the **cédille** is not needed under the **c** since the following **i** makes the **c** sound [s].

commencer to begin

je commençais

tu commençais

il/elle/on commençait

nous commencions

vous commenciez

ils/elles commençaient

- ◆ Verbs ending in **-ger**, such as **voyager** (to travel), **partager** (to share), **déménager** (to move), etc., insert an **e** after the **g** in all persons of the imperfect except in the **nous** and **vous** forms to conserve the sound [ʒ]. In these persons, the inserted **e** is not needed since the following **i** makes the **g** sound [ʒ].

nager to swim

je nageais

tu nageais

il/elle/on nageait

nous nagions

vous nageiez

ils/elles nageaient

- ◆ Verbs with stems that end in **-i**, such as **étudier** (to study), **remercier** (to thank), etc., have a double **i** in the **nous** and **vous** forms.

oublier to forget

j'oubliais

tu oubliais

il/elle/on oubliais

nous oubliions

vous oubliiez

ils/elles oubliiaient

- B. Since the *irregular verbs* also derive their imperfect stem from the first-person plural of the present tense, you will easily find this stem if you know the present tense of these verbs. Once you have found the stem, all you need to do is add the appropriate endings. Here are some examples:

INFINITIVE	NOUS FORM OF PRESENT TENSE	IMPERFECT TENSE
aller to go	nous allons	j' allais
s'asseoir to sit down	nous nous asseyons	je m' asseyais (or: je m' assoyais)
avoir to have	nous avons	j' avais
boire to drink	nous buvons	je buvais

INFINITIVE	NOUS FORM OF PRESENT TENSE	IMPERFECT TENSE
craindre <i>to fear</i>	nous craignons	je craignais
croire <i>to believe</i>	nous croions	je croiais
dire <i>to say</i>	nous disons	je disais
dormir <i>to sleep</i>	nous dormons	je dormais
faire <i>to do</i>	nous faisons [nuʔəzɔ̃]	je faisais [ʒəfɛzɛ]
pouvoir <i>to be able to</i>	nous pouvons	je pouvais
recevoir <i>to receive</i>	nous recevons	je recevais
rire <i>to laugh</i>	nous riions	je riais (nous riions , vous riiez)
vouloir <i>to want</i>	nous voulons	je voulais

C. The verb **être** is the only verb which has an irregular stem (**ét-**) in the imperfect tense. Here is its conjugation:

j'étais	<i>I was</i>	nous étions	<i>we were</i>
tu étais	<i>you were</i>	vous étiez	<i>you were</i>
il/elle/on était	<i>he/she/it/one was</i>	ils/elles étaient	<i>they were</i>

D. The imperfect forms of the impersonal verbs **falloir**, **pleuvoir**, and **neiger** (which do not exist in the **nous** form) are as follows:

falloir	<i>to be necessary</i>	il fallait	<i>it was necessary</i>
pleuvoir	<i>to rain</i>	il pleuvait	<i>it was raining</i>
neiger	<i>to snow</i>	il neigeait	<i>it was snowing</i>

EXERCICE

6-1

Est-ce vrai ou faux?

Quand j'étais petit(e),...

- _____ 1. je jouais avec des poupées.
- _____ 2. je regardais rarement des dessins animés.
- _____ 3. j'avais peur des araignées (*spiders*).
- _____ 4. j'allais souvent au zoo.
- _____ 5. je ne pleurais jamais.
- _____ 6. j'obéissais toujours à mes parents.
- _____ 7. je ne buvais pas de lait.
- _____ 8. je mangeais beaucoup de bonbons.
- _____ 9. j'étais toujours heureux (heureuse).
- _____ 10. je ne riais pas.

Donnez l'imparfait des verbes entre parenthèses.

1. À l'époque, je (travailler) _____ à l'ambassade.
2. Il (jouer) _____ souvent du piano.
3. Stéphanie (perdre) _____ ses clés fréquemment.
4. Nous (remercier) _____ rarement nos parents.
5. Est-ce que tu (partager) _____ tes jouets avec tes frères et sœurs quand tu (être) _____ petit(e)?
6. L'école (commencer) _____ à huit heures tous les matins.
7. Il (falloir) _____ se dépêcher chaque jour.
8. Chaque fois qu'elle (mentir) _____ elle (rougir) _____.
9. Nous (faire) _____ du ski chaque hiver.
10. Ils (dormir) _____ quand le cambrioleur est entré dans la maison.
11. Pourquoi (rire) _____-vous tout le temps?
12. Nous (croire) _____ que la situation (aller) _____ s'améliorer.
13. Il (pleuvoir) _____ quand elle est partie.
14. Il ne (pleurer) _____ pas.
15. Autrefois, j' (avoir) _____ un chien et un chat.
16. D'habitude, j' (aller) _____ au gymnase avant de rentrer.
17. Il (neiger) _____ quelquefois dans mon pays.
18. Comment (s'appeler) _____ vos amis?
19. À quelle heure (prendre) _____-tu le petit déjeuner le dimanche?
20. Le samedi, nous (se lever) _____ tard.

The uses of the imperfect tense

- A. The imperfect is used to describe *habitual* or *repeated actions* in the past. Often, the verb in the imperfect tense is accompanied by an expression of time that indicates or implies repetition, such as:

à l'époque / à cette époque-là
 autrefois
 avant
 chaque été/hiver
 chaque année
 chaque fois que

in those days
formerly, in the past
before
every summer/winter
every year
each time

chaque jour
 chaque mois
 de temps en temps
 d'habitude
 fréquemment
 généralement
 jamais
 le lundi / le mardi, etc.
 quand j'étais adolescent(e)
 quand j'étais enfant
 quand j'étais étudiant(e)
 quand j'étais jeune
 quand j'étais petit(e)
 quelquefois/parfois
 rarement
 souvent
 toujours
 tous les ans
 tous les jours
 tous les matins
 tous les soirs
 tous les lundis, mardis, etc.

every day
 every month
 from time to time
 usually
 frequently
 generally
 never
 on Mondays / on Tuesdays, etc.
 when I was a teenager
 when I was a child
 when I was a student
 when I was young
 when I was little
 sometimes
 rarely
 often
 always
 every year
 every day
 every morning
 every evening
 every Monday, Tuesday, etc.

EXERCICE

6-3

Traduisez en français les phrases suivantes.

1. My grandmother went to church every Sunday. _____
2. They (*masc.*) got up early every morning. _____
3. She frequently went out. _____
4. When I was little, I watched cartoons all the time. _____
5. You (*fam.*) played the guitar every day. _____
6. We ate together from time to time. _____
7. In those days, my parents and I lived in Rome. _____
8. You (*pol.*) always forgot your glasses. _____
9. I rarely saw him. _____
10. Now, I weigh sixty-five kilos; before I weighed fifty-five kilos. _____
11. Each time he had an exam, he slept badly. _____
12. When she was a child, she liked ice cream a lot. _____

When the imperfect describes *repeated* actions in the past, the English expressions *used to* (+ infinitive) and *would* (+ infinitive) can be seen as the equivalent of this tense, because *used to* and *would* indicate that an action or situation occurred an unknown number of times.

EXERCICE

6-4

Traduisez en français les phrases suivantes.

1. They used to travel a lot. _____
2. Where did you (*pol.*) used to live? _____
3. You (*fam.*) used to read a lot of comics. _____
4. My friend used to call me every night. _____
5. I used to go to bed early. _____
6. She used to drink a glass of milk every morning. _____
7. We used to see each other often. _____
8. They used to complain about (**de**) everything. _____

EXERCICE

6-5

Traduisez en français les phrases suivantes.

1. Each time the teacher would enter, all the students would get up. _____
2. He would always help me. _____
3. When we lived in France, we would drink wine for lunch and dinner. _____
4. When I was a student, I would eat in the dining commons (**au resto-U**) every day. _____
5. My mom would visit me once a month (**une fois par mois**). _____
6. Each time, she would bring money, gifts, and treats (**des friandises [f.pl.]**). _____
7. I would never miss class. _____
8. My housemates and I would study in the library every afternoon. _____
9. In the evenings (**le soir**), we would go out together and we would have a good time. _____

- B. The imperfect is also used for an *action* which was *in progress* for an unknown period of time, or for two actions that were going on *simultaneously*. In English such actions are usually expressed by *was/were . . . -ing*.

*The children were playing outside.
Anne was driving while her son was
resting in the back of the car.*

Les enfants **jouaient** dehors.
Anne **conduisait** pendant que son fils
se reposait à l'arrière de la voiture.

EXERCICE

6-6

Traduisez en français. Utilisez l'imparfait.

1. * The car wasn't working. _____
2. I was looking for the remote control. _____
3. She was wondering where you (*pol.*) were. _____
4. Everyone was having a good time. _____
5. I was thinking about you (**à toi**) all the time. _____
6. It was raining cats and dogs (**des cordes**). _____
7. The baby was crying. _____
8. Were they (*fem.*) telling the truth? _____
9. What was she doing? _____
10. You (*pol.*) were working hard. _____
11. I was joking (**plaisanter**). _____
12. He was listening to the radio while his wife was getting dressed. _____

The imperfect and the **passé composé** are used in the same sentence when the action in progress serves as *background* for another action, which took place while the first action was still going on. The interrupting action is in the **passé composé**.

It was snowing when we left.

Il **neigeait** quand nous sommes partis.

EXERCICE

6-7

Traduisez en français les phrases suivantes.

1. I was cleaning the house when the mailman arrived. _____
2. They (*masc.*) were playing soccer when it started to rain. _____
3. Andrée was going to the movies when she met her friends. _____

4. We were sleeping when someone knocked on the door. _____
5. You (*fam.*) were writing a letter when the phone rang. _____
6. I was driving the children to school when the car broke down. _____

7. What were you (*pol.*) saying when I entered the room? _____

C. The imperfect is used to give *descriptions* of people (including the indication of their names and ages) and things (including weather) in the past; that is, it shows what someone or something was like rather than what happened.

La jeune femme **s'appelait** Anne et elle **avait** vingt ans. Elle **était** petite et jolie.
The young woman's name was Anne and she was twenty years old. She was short and pretty.

EXERCICE

6-8

Traduisez en français les phrases suivantes.

1. She had green eyes and brown hair. _____
2. The bridegroom was wearing a tuxedo. _____
3. The bride was beautiful. _____
4. How old were you (*fam.*) at that time? _____
5. What was the name of your (*fam.*) neighbor? _____
6. What was the weather like? _____
7. It was sunny. _____
8. He was 1 m 90 tall (= he measured 1 m 90) and weighed one hundred kilos. _____
9. The appetizers were delicious. _____
10. The landscape was magnificent. _____

Note:

- ◆ With *age*, the **passé composé** expresses *to turn* a certain age.

Elle a eu soixante ans lundi dernier. *Last Monday, she turned sixty.*

- ◆ With *weather*, the **passé composé** is used when a specific or limited time is mentioned.

Il **a fait** beau pendant une semaine. *The weather was good for a week.*
 Hier, il **a fait** du vent. *Yesterday, it was windy.*

D. The imperfect describes *mental, physical, or emotional states* of unlimited duration. The following verbs which indicate such states are therefore often used in the imperfect:

- adorer to adore
- aimer to like
- s'attendre à to expect
- avoir (faim, peur, mal à la tête, etc.) to be (hungry, afraid, etc.), to have (a headache, etc.)
- connaître to know
- croire to believe
- désirer to wish
- détester to detest
- espérer to hope
- être (malade, fatigué, heureux, etc.) to be (ill, tired, happy, etc.)
- penser to think
- pouvoir to be able
- préférer to prefer
- regretter to regret
- savoir to know
- sembler to seem
- se sentir to feel
- souhaiter to wish
- vouloir to want

EXERCICE

6-9

Traduisez en français les phrases suivantes.

1. She adored children. _____
2. I hoped to be famous some day. _____
3. He didn't expect that (**cela**). _____
4. They (*masc.*) were afraid. _____
5. She didn't want to leave. _____
6. Were you (*fam.*) cold? _____
7. Robert had a fever (**de la fièvre**). _____
8. Did you (*pol.*) know this person? _____
9. Did he believe this story? _____
10. Sophie hated red; she preferred purple. _____
11. They (*masc.*) felt guilty (**coupable**). _____
12. I was disappointed. _____
13. Were they (*masc.*) in a good mood (**de bonne humeur**)? _____
14. I thought (= believed) that you (*fam.*) didn't like that (**ça**). _____
15. They (*fem.*) didn't know that he was ill. _____

But: When the mental, physical or emotional state is momentary, of limited duration, or if it changes or occurs suddenly (as is the case in the following examples), the **passé composé** is used with the verbs listed above.

Ce matin, j'**ai cru** qu'il grêlait.
Tout à coup, il **a eu** sommeil.

*This morning, I thought it was hailing.
Suddenly, he was (= became, got) sleepy.*

E. The imperfect is also used to indicate the *time of day, the day of the week, the date, the month, the year, and seasons* in the past.

Il **était** dix heures quand je me suis réveillé(e).

It was ten o'clock when I woke up.

C'**était** l'hiver.

It was winter.

EXERCICE

6-10

Traduisez en français les phrases suivantes.

1. What time was it when you (*fam.*) came home? _____
2. It was three o'clock. _____
3. It was noon when we had lunch. _____
4. It was a quarter to five when she called. _____
5. What day was it? —It was Thursday. _____
6. It was the first of January. _____
7. It was too late. _____

F. Other uses of the imperfect tense

The imperfect is also used after **si**

- ◆ in *exclamations* to express a *wish* (here, **si** is generally followed by **seulement**)

Si seulement j'**étais** riche!

I wish I were rich! (If only I was rich!)

- ◆ in *questions* to express a *suggestion* or a *supposition* made in the present (English: *What if...? How about... -ing?*)

Si on allait se baigner?

What if we went swimming?

Si on prenait un verre?

How about having a drink?

The imperfect is the *only* past tense used when the following expressions are in a past context.

aller + (inf.) *to be going to (do sth)*

J'**allais** sortir.

I was going to go out.

venir de + (inf.) *to have just (done sth)*

Il venait de rentrer.

He **had just** come home.

être en train de + (inf.) *to be in the process of (doing sth)*

Nous étions en train de manger.

We **were in the process of** eating.

être sur le point de + (inf.) *to be about to (do sth)*

Ils étaient sur le point de partir.

They **were about to** leave.

For the use of the imperfect after **depuis**, see *The uses of the pluperfect tense*, page 136. For the use of the imperfect in conditional sentences, see *The conditional*, page 169.

EXERCICE

6-11

Traduisez en français les phrases suivantes.

1. If only I had more time! _____
2. What if we (**on**) went to the movies tonight? _____
3. I was going to give her a gift but I changed my mind. _____

4. She was going to buy a camera but she didn't have enough money. _____

5. We were going to do the laundry but the washing machine was broken. _____

6. What were you (*fam.*) going to say? _____
7. They believed that the strike was going to stop. _____
8. I knew that this (**ça**) was going to be difficult. _____
9. We had just moved. _____
10. They (*masc.*) had just arrived when I saw them. _____
11. She was in the process of washing the dishes. _____
12. They (*masc.*) were about to lose patience. _____

EXERCICE

6-12

Nicole parle de son enfance. Traduisez en français ce qu'elle raconte.

When I was little, my grandmother always came to visit us at Christmas. It was a long trip for her, because we lived in the United States, and she came from France. Therefore, her arrival was a big event for me, and I always anticipated it with great joy. Every year, my grandma spoiled me with many gifts, and there was always chocolate and a new doll. When I was older,