

The Preterit Tense

Regular Verbs in the Preterit

The preterit (*el pretérito*) is one of several past tenses used in Spanish. As you study how to narrate and communicate in the past, you will be able to distinguish these past tenses by their endings and the specific functions they perform in context.

The preterit of regular verbs is formed by dropping the *-ar*, *-er*, and *-ir* of the infinitives and adding the following endings:

nadar (to swim)	comer (to eat)	vivir (to live)
nadé nadamos	comí comimos	viví vivimos
nadaste nadasteis	comiste comisteis	viviste vivisteis
nadó nadaron	comió comieron	vivió vivieron

Note the following:

- The first- and third-person singular forms of the preterit have a written accent mark.
- The **nosotros** form of *-ar* and *-ir* verbs is the same in the preterit and the present.

The context (words surrounding the conjugated verb) will give you the cues necessary to identify and use the appropriate tense. In the examples that follow, each of the first two statements expresses an habitual action in the present with the help of the expressions **todos los días** (*every day*) and **siempre** (*always*). The present tense is appropriate in these examples.

Llegamos a las doce
todos los días.

We arrive at noon every day.

Siempre viajamos a
California los veranos.

*We always travel to California
in the summer.*

On the other hand, the expressions of time **ayer... a la una y media** (*yesterday . . . at one thirty*) and **el año pasado** (*last year*) change the context of the statements, pointing to actions or events that took place at specific times in the past.

Ayer llegamos a la una y media.

Yesterday we arrived at one thirty.

El año pasado viajamos a Venezuela.

Last year we traveled to Venezuela.

These expressions of time provide context and help determine when the actions take or took place.

ejercicio

4-1

¿Y ayer, qué hicieron? Escribe la forma apropiada del pretérito del verbo entre paréntesis.

1. Los hombres _____ (abrir) las puertas de la oficina.
2. ¿_____ (perder) tú el dinero?
3. La atleta _____ (correr) en el maratón.
4. ¡Tú _____ (olvidar) los documentos en el autobús!
5. Marcelo y yo _____ (recibir) una invitación para tu fiesta.
6. Marta y Melisa _____ (terminar) su trabajo a tiempo.
7. Marta _____ (enviar) la carta por correo.
8. ¿_____ (comprar) Ud. estos pantalones en una venta especial?

When Is the Preterit Used in Spanish?

Verb endings in Spanish indicate which noun or pronoun is doing the action. In addition, they provide details about the time and the circumstances under which the action takes place. As you describe experiences, events, or situations in the past, remember that different past tenses communicate different ideas. Thus, you must choose the tense that fits the message you want to convey. You have already seen some examples of uses of the preterit and expressions of time used with this tense.

The preterit is used to express:

- an action that was totally completed in the past.

Ellos viajaron el mes pasado.

They traveled last month.

- an action completed at a definite, specific moment in the past.

Mi suegro regresó a las cuatro.

My father-in-law came back at four o'clock.

Key time expressions help us establish the meaning of each sentence. **El mes pasado** and **a las cuatro** point out the time the actions took place and signal the use of the preterit. Sometimes these signals or expressions may not be stated literally. A single word such as **Salí** is equivalent to *I left*, communicating a simple action completed in the past. Learn the following expressions,

which indicate a specific or fixed point in the past, or when an action began or ended, so that you may use the preterit clearly.

vocabulario

a esa hora	at that time	el año pasado	last year
anoche	last night	el (lunes) pasado	last (Monday)
anteanoche	the night before last	el mes pasado	last month
anteayer	the day before yesterday	en ese momento	at that moment
ayer al mediodía	yesterday at noon	hace (diez) años	(ten) years ago
ayer por la mañana	yesterday morning	hoy por la mañana	this morning
ayer por la noche	yesterday evening	la semana pasada	last week
ayer por la tarde	yesterday afternoon		

ejercicio

4-2

En español. Usa la lista de expresiones para escribir en español las oraciones siguientes.

1. The night before last, Ana returned home. _____
2. This morning, Pilar sent three e-mails to the bank. _____
3. Roberto traveled to San Antonio last month. _____
4. Ten years ago I moved to this building. _____
5. Detective Rojas and his assistant solved (**resolver**) the case last week. _____
6. At eight o'clock this morning, the doctor visited his new patient. _____

ejercicio

4-3

Y en tu caso... ¿Verdadero o falso?

- _____ 1. Anoche, salí de casa a las ocho.
- _____ 2. Tomé dos tazas de café por la mañana.
- _____ 3. Compré dos billetes de lotería.
- _____ 4. Visité un museo en la ciudad.
- _____ 5. Regresé a casa por la tarde.
- _____ 6. Leí mis mensajes en Internet.

Other Uses of the Preterit

The preterit is also used to communicate other actions in the past, such as:

- an action or event that lasted for a specific period of time. If you can determine for how long the action took place, use the preterit.

Esperó dos horas en el consultorio
del Dr. Bernal.

She waited two hours at Dr. Bernal's office.

- a series of actions or events completed in the past. Note that you may not be able to determine when these actions took place or for how long; yet you can identify a series of specific actions in the past.

Yo llegué a la oficina, **preparé** un café,
me senté y **llamé** a un cliente.

*I arrived at the office, prepared a cup of coffee,
sat down, and called a client.*

- actions or events that are not usually repeated, such as:

cumplir años to turn a specific age
darse cuenta de to realize
decidir to decide

descubrir to discover
graduarse to graduate
morir to die

Usually it is easy to establish that the action was completed at a certain point in the past or to determine the specific time it occurred, making the use of the preterit logical.

Mi hermano **cumplió** treinta años.
Los gemelos **se graduaron** hace
varios años.
Ella **murió** a los noventa años.

*My brother turned twenty.
The twins graduated a few years ago.
She died at ninety years of age.*

ejercicio

4-4

Momentos importantes de la vida de Paco. Indica el orden de esos momentos con los números 1 a 5.

- _____ 1. Estudió cuatro años en la escuela secundaria.
- _____ 2. Trabajó en un proyecto de arquitectura por tres años.
- _____ 3. Decidió cambiar de profesión.
- _____ 4. Nació en una ciudad pequeña.
- _____ 5. Se graduó de arquitecto de la universidad de Madrid.

ejercicio

4-5

Carlos y su amigo pasaron el fin de semana juntos. En español.

Mi amigo y yo...

1. watched the game on television. _____

2. ate Mexican food, drank a soda, and washed the dishes. _____
3. visited my aunt Matilde. _____
4. arrived at 3:00 and chatted with my aunt. _____
5. realized that Matilde's dog is very ugly. _____

ejercicio

4-6

¿Qué hiciste ayer? Escribe en español.

1. Por la mañana _____, _____ y _____.
2. Al mediodía, yo _____ y _____.
3. Por la tarde _____, _____ y también yo _____.
4. Por la noche _____, _____ y _____.

Verbs with Spelling Changes in the Preterit

Some verbs have spelling changes in the preterit tense. Technically, they are not irregular verbs, but the changes are required by Spanish spelling rules to preserve the hard sound of the consonants **g** and **c** with **-que** and **-gue**. Note that in the preterit these changes apply to the **yo** form only:

- Verbs that end in **-car** change the **c** to **qu**: **explicar**, **expliqué**
- Verbs that end in **-gar** change the **g** to **gu**: **llegar**, **llegué**
- Verbs that end in **-zar** change the **z** to **c**: **almorzar**, **almorcé**

Study the following frequently used verbs that show these spelling changes.

-car		-gar		-zar	
atacar	to attack	agregar	to add	abrazar	to hug
buscar	to look for	apagar	to put out (<i>a light</i>)	alcanzar	to reach
chocar	to crash	cargar	to load	almorzar	to eat, have lunch
colocar	to place	castigar	to punish	cruzar	to cross
complicar	to complicate	entregar	to hand over	empezar	to begin
explicar	to explain	jugar	to play (<i>a game or sport</i>)	gozar	to enjoy
pescar	to fish	negar	to deny	lanzar	to throw
practicar	to practice	pagar	to pay	rezar	to pray
sacar	to take out	pegar	to glue; to pick up	tranquilizar	to calm
tocar	to touch; to play (<i>music, an instrument</i>)			tropezar	to trip

ejercicio

4-7

El sábado Marta estuvo muy ocupada. Entre paréntesis, subraya el verbo que tiene sentido en la frase.

1. (Busqué | Indiqué) mi equipo de béisbol por toda la casa.
2. (Tranquilicé | Llegué) al parque a las ocho.
3. Entonces (lancé | abracé) la pelota unos minutos para calentar el brazo.
4. (Apagué | Jugué) un partido con mis amigos de la oficina.
5. Al mediodía (almorcé | cargué) con mis amigos.
6. Luego (crucé | saqué) unas fotos de mis colegas.
7. (Organicé | Castigué) una fiesta para mi jefe.
8. (Jugué | Toqué) el piano en la fiesta.
9. (Negué | Gocé) mucho ese día.

ejercicio

4-8

¿Qué hiciste tú? Busca el verbo que tiene sentido. Después, escribe la primera persona del pretérito.

abrazar	buscar	empezar	jugar	practicar
almorzar	colocar	explicar	pagar	tocar

1. _____ las cuentas a tiempo con mi tarjeta de crédito.
2. _____ una nueva dieta.
3. _____ un empleo en el periódico.
4. _____ el piano por dos horas.
5. _____ al tenis con un amigo.
6. _____ las ropas en el ropero (*closet*).
7. _____ una sopa y vegetales antes del mediodía.
8. _____ español con mis amigos mexicanos.
9. _____ mis síntomas a mi médico.
10. _____ a mis amigos cuando llegaron a casa.

Other Spelling Changes in the Preterit

Other verbs have spelling changes in the preterit. Observe the conjugations of **leer**, **oír**, and **construir**.

leer (to read)		oír (to hear)		construir (to build)	
leí	leímos	oí	oímos	construí	construimos
leíste	leísteis	oíste	oísteis	construiste	construisteis
leyó	leyeron	oyó	oyeron	construyó	construyeron

Observe that:

- **leer**, **oír**, and **construir** change **i** to **y**, but only in the third-person singular and plural forms. All the forms of **leer** and **oír** have accent marks on the endings except the **ellos/ellas** form.
- other verbs frequently used in Spanish follow the patterns of **leer**, **oír**, and **construir**.

Read and study the following lists.

Verbs like **leer**

caer(se)	to fall
creer	to believe
poseer	to own, possess

Verbs like **oír**

desoír	to ignore
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Verbs like **construir**

concluir	to finish
contribuir	to contribute
distribuir	to distribute
huir	to flee
incluir	to include
intuir	to feel, have a sense

ejercicio

4-9

Práctica. Escribe la forma que corresponde en el pretérito.

1. He fell. _____
2. Alicia read the magazine. _____
3. She heard my song! _____
4. My aunt distributed the money. _____
5. She believed a lie. _____
6. The ceremony concluded on time. _____
7. My friends built a house. _____
8. Did she read the book? _____
9. The horse fled. _____

ejercicio

4-10

Un misterio. Escribe en el pasado. Change the verb in italics to the preterit tense.

1. El detective Martínez *lee* una carta anónima. _____
2. En la carta, el autor *incluye* noticias acerca de un caso muy misterioso y difícil. _____
3. Martínez *intuye* la identidad del autor de la carta. _____
4. Sus asistentes *distribuyen* copias de la carta a los oficiales. _____
5. La carta *contribuye* a resolver un caso muy complicado. _____
6. Todos *concluyen* que Martínez siempre gana. _____

Stem-Changing Verbs in the Preterit

As in the present tense, there is a pattern of stem changes in the Spanish preterit. Remember that:

- -ar verbs with stem changes in the present tense *do not* have stem changes in the preterit.
- -ir verbs with stem changes in the present tense also have stem changes in the preterit.

The changes in the preterit for -ir verbs are as follows: e changes to i and o changes to u, *only* in the third-person singular and plural forms.

pedir (to ask for)		dormir (to sleep)		preferir (to prefer)	
pedí	pedimos	dormí	dormimos	preferí	preferimos
pediste	pedisteis	dormiste	dormisteis	preferiste	preferisteis
pidió	pidieron	durmió	durmieron	prefirió	prefirieron

Study the following verbs conjugated like **pedir**, **dormir**, and **preferir**.

Verbs like **pedir**

conseguir	to get
convertir	to change
reír	to laugh
repetir	to repeat
seguir	to follow
servir	to serve
sonreír(se)	to smile
vestir(se)	to get dressed

Verbs like **dormir**

morir	to die
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Verbs like **preferir**

divertir(se)	to have fun
mentir	to lie (tell a falsehood)
sentir	to feel; to be sorry

Observe the conjugation of **reír** and **sonreír** in the preterit. All the forms except the third-person plural of **reír** and **sonreír** have a written accent mark.

reír (to laugh)		sonreír (to smile)	
reí	reímos	sonreí	sonreímos
reíste	reísteis	sonreíste	sonreísteis
rió	rieron	sonrió	sonrieron

ejercicio

4-11

Una reunión en el restaurante. Escribe la forma apropiada del pretérito.

- Hace una semana, Pedro _____ (invitar) a sus amigos Roberto y Elsa a cenar en "El patio".
- Ayer, Pedro _____ (vestirse) y a las seis _____ (salir) de casa para ir al restaurante.
- Cuando él _____ (llegar), sus amigos lo saludaron y _____ (sonreír).
- Después, ellos tres _____ (pedir) arroz con pollo, la especialidad de "El patio".
- Al poco rato, el camarero _____ (servir) la cena.
- Elsa y Roberto _____ (seguir) hablando de sus planes para el verano.
- Pedro _____ (divertirse) mucho con las anécdotas de Elsa.
- De postre, Roberto _____ (pedir) flan.
- Elsa _____ (preferir) un helado de chocolate.
- Pedro no _____ (conseguir) su postre favorito, arroz con leche.

ejercicio

4-12

¿Qué pasó? En español. Usa el pretérito.

- At the gym, Marisa managed (**conseguir**) to finish her exercises early. _____
- She got dressed and arrived at the movies at 6:00 P.M. _____
- She bought a ticket and ordered (**pedir**) a soda. _____
- A young girl served her the drink and smiled. _____
- In the theater, she sat and watched the commercials. _____

6. So many commercials! She paid to see a movie, not boring commercials! _____
7. Marisa slept for one hour. _____
8. She woke up twenty minutes before the end of the movie. _____

Irregular Verbs in the Preterit

Many common verbs have irregular forms in the Spanish preterit. These verbs have irregular stems and are easy to group according to their patterns of stem changes and endings. Instead of the regular preterit verb endings they have a distinctive set of endings. Note that they are without accent marks: **-e, -iste, -o, -imos, -isteis, -ieron.**

Study the following patterns of irregular verbs.

- Verbs with **uv** in the stem:

andar (to walk)	anduv-	anduve, anduviste, anduvo, anduvimos, anduvisteis, anduvieron
estar (to be)	estuv-	estuve, estuviste, estuvo, estuvimos, estuvisteis, estuvieron
tener (to have)	tuv-	tuve, tuviste, tuvo, tuvimos, tuvisteis, tuvieron

- Verbs with a **u** in the stem:

caber (to fit)	cup-	cupe, cupiste, cupo, cupimos, cupisteis, cupieron
haber (must, to be)	hub-	hube, hubiste, hubo, hubimos, hubisteis, hubieron
poder (to be able)	pud-	pude, pudiste, pudo, pudimos, pudisteis, pudieron
poner (to put)	pus-	pusé, pusiste, puso, pusimos, pusisteis, pusieron
saber (to know)	sup-	supe, supiste, supo, supimos, supisteis, supieron

ejercicio

4-13

Práctica. Usa el pretérito.

1. Alberto could not. _____
2. Last night Rita put the keys on the table. _____
3. The suitcase did not fit in the car trunk. _____
4. Yesterday there was a meeting. _____
5. They were here. _____
6. I put the fork in the drawer (**gaveta**). _____
7. We had to go to the store. _____
8. Were you (**Uds.**) at the party? _____
9. My friends had an accident. _____

- Verbs with **i** in the stem:

hacer (to do)	hic-	hice, hiciste, hizo, hicimos, hicisteis, hicieron
querer (to want)	quis-	quise, quisiste, quiso, quisimos, quisisteis, quisieron
venir (to come)	vin-	vine, viniste, vino, vinimos, vinisteis, vinieron

Note that, because of a spelling change, the third-person form of **hacer** is **hizo**.

- Verbs that have **j** in the stem:

atraer (to attract)	atraj-	atraje, atrajiste, atrajo, atrajimos, atrajisteis, atrajeron
decir (to say)	dij-	dije, dijiste, dijo, dijimos, dijisteis, dijeron
producir (to produce)	produj-	produje, produjiste, produjo, produjimos, produjisteis, produjeron
traer (to bring)	traj-	traje, trajiste, trajo, trajimos, trajisteis, trajeron
traducir (to translate)	traduj-	traduje, tradujiste, tradujo, tradujimos, tradujisteis, tradujeron

Note that the third-person plural ending of this last group of verbs is **-eron**.

ejercicio
4-14

Más práctica. Usa el pretérito.

- I did not tell a lie. _____
- She brought a cake. _____
- They translated the exercises. _____
- We did the work. _____
- You (tú) came late. _____
- Tim did the homework. _____
- Did they come? _____

Many compound verbs are formed with a prefix plus an irregular verb. These compounds follow the conjugation patterns of the basic verbs. Here are some examples:

Compounds of poner

componer	to repair; to compose
disponer	to arrange; to dispose
suponer	to assume

Compounds of hacer and venir

deshacer	to undo
rehacer	to make over; to rebuild
convenir	to agree

Compounds of decir, producir, and traer

desdecir	to disagree
predecir	to predict
reproducir	to reproduce
atraer	to attract
distraer	to distract

More Irregular Verbs in the Preterit

- **Dar, ser, and ir** are irregular.

dar (to give)		ser (to be) and ir (to go)	
di	dimos	fui	fuimos
diste	disteis	fuiste	fuisteis
dio	dieron	fue	fueron

Note that:

- **dar** takes the regular **-er, -ir** preterit endings.
- **ser** and **ir** forms in the preterit are the same for both verbs. The context (the words surrounding the verb) will help you guess their meaning.

Ellos **no fueron** a la playa el domingo. *They did not go to the beach on Sunday.*
 Ellos **fueron** los campeones del torneo de golf. *They were the champions of the golf tournament.*

In the first example, **ir** is the logical guess because the preposition **a** follows: **a la playa**. In the second example, **fueron**, a preterit form of **ser**, links the pronoun **ellos** and the noun **campeones**. For better understanding, always try to read or listen to the entire sentence or meaningful group of words.

ejercicio

4-15

La semana pasada en la agencia. Escribe la forma del pretérito que corresponde.

1. El lunes, Ana _____ (hacer) todo su trabajo.
2. La Srta. Simpson _____ (traer) unos paquetes para las secretarias.
3. La secretaria le _____ (dar) un informe a su jefe.
4. Paula y yo _____ (ir) al departamento de finanzas.
5. El miércoles yo _____ (poner) un aviso en el boletín (*newsletter*).
6. El vicepresidente de la compañía _____ (venir) a saludar a los trabajadores.
7. El jueves, los anuncios en la página de la Web _____ (producir) buenos resultados.
8. Ana y yo _____ (proponer) una campaña para la tele.
9. El viernes yo no _____ (poder) ir a la oficina.
10. Mi jefe _____ (suponer) que yo estaba enfermo.

Verbs with a Special Meaning in the Preterit

Some verbs change their basic meaning when conjugated in the preterit. Remember the following special meanings in the preterit:

- **conocer** (*to meet*)

Conocí al director de la escuela ayer. *I met the school principal yesterday.*

- **saber** (*to find out, discover*)

Supo la verdad. *He found out the truth.*

- **poder** (*to manage*)

No pudieron terminar. *They did not manage to finish.*

- **querer** (*to refuse [in negative sentences]*)

Yo no quise salir a tiempo. *I refused to leave on time.*

- **querer** (*to try*)

Marta quiso ayudarme. *Marta tried to help me.*

- **tener** (*to receive, get*)

Tuve noticias hoy. *I got (received) news today.*

ejercicio

4-16

En español.

- Two days ago Marcos brought the flowers. _____
- The interpreter translated the exercises in this book. _____
- Yesterday I gave my key to your sister. _____
- We went to the park on Sunday. _____
- Ricardo was the company's president for three years. _____
- The two brothers were here last night. _____
- Elisa and I could not get to your meeting at six o'clock. _____
- Did you (Ud.) put the money on the table? _____
- You (tú) were not in class last night. _____
- I did not have an accident last week! _____
- We met Ambrosio a month ago. _____

ejercicio

4-17

¿Verdadero o falso?

- _____ 1. John Glenn fue el primer hombre en llegar a la luna.
- _____ 2. Los soviéticos enviaron el primer perro al espacio.
- _____ 3. El muro de Berlín cayó en 1990.
- _____ 4. Los juegos olímpicos de 1992 fueron en Barcelona.
- _____ 5. Los Yankees ganaron la serie mundial de béisbol en 1999.
- _____ 6. *ET* recibió el premio a la mejor película en 1982.
- _____ 7. La canción "Macarena" popularizó un ritmo de España en los Estados Unidos.
- _____ 8. Comenzamos a usar la Internet activamente en 1960.

ejercicio

4-18

En la librería. Traduce. Usa el vocabulario útil.

Bookstores are not just places to buy books. Bookstores are comfortable places to spend time away from home. You can read a magazine, listen to your favorite music CD, or have a snack. Last week, I stopped by my favorite bookstore. "Why not?" I thought and went inside. I saw a big sign with the title *The Black Spot*, a new mystery novel. With a copy of the novel, I sat in a very comfortable chair near the café. I read a few pages and decided to have a cup of decaffeinated coffee. I went back to my chair and drank my coffee slowly. When I decided to leave, I noticed a coffee stain on my new tie. I got up, went to the cash register, paid for the novel with my credit card, and went out. Unfortunately, the discount I received with my reader's discount card did not pay for the dry cleaner's bill.

vocabulario útil

bookstore	la librería	place	el lugar
cash register	la caja	reader	el lector/la lectora
CD	el disco compacto (CD)	sign	el anuncio
comfortable	cómodo(a)	special sale	la venta especial
credit card	la tarjeta de crédito	to have a snack	comer algo
decaffeinated	descafeinado	to pick, choose	tomar, coger
discount	el descuento	to spill	derramar
discount card	la tarjeta de descuento	to stop at	detenerse
magazine	la revista		