

The Preterit Tense¹: Talking about the past

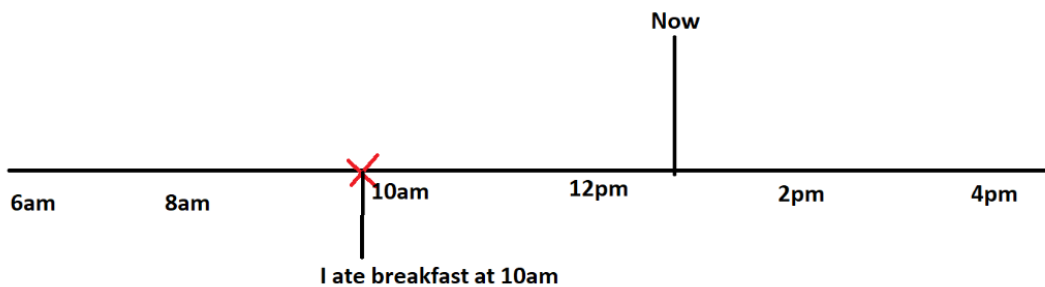
It's easier than you think!

What “preterit” means

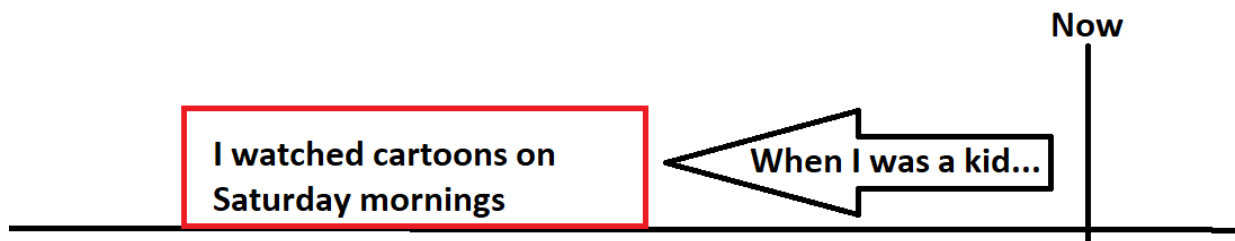
You've made it to another series of Spanish conjugations that you must learn! With this comes new challenges, but along with those come new ways that you can express yourself in Spanish.

The “preterit”² is what we use to talk about past events that happened exactly *once*, or actions that have a definitive endpoint.

If I wanted to talk about when I had breakfast today, I would use the preterit, both in English and in Spanish, because this event has a definitive endpoint. **Here's one way to visualize this** using verb timelines:



Actions that take place many times over a specified period of time are **not** appropriate for the use of the preterit in Spanish. Here's an example of a **different** aspect other than the preterit that you will learn later called the imperfect:



This action (watching cartoons) happened over **many** Saturday mornings “when I was a kid.” In this sentence, in Spanish, we **cannot** use the preterit form because the preterit is used **only for activities that have a single definitive endpoint**.

¹ Really, the “preterit tense” that we talk about in Spanish class is a way of talking about the past tense, and the word “preterit” refers to verbal aspect, not a verbal tense.

² Sometimes, “preterit” is called “perfective” in grammar.

How the preterit is formed in Spanish

Like with most tense formations (or conjugations) in Spanish, we have to think about them in terms of the two (or three, depending on who's counting) verb classes in Spanish.

Let's start with the -ar verb class:

	First person ("I" and "We")	Second person ("You" and "Y'all")	Third person ("He/She/It" and "They")
Singular	-é	-aste	-ó ³
Plural	-amos ⁴	-aron	-aron

As we did with the present tense forms, conjugating for the preterit entails taking off the -ar ending of a verb and replacing it with the appropriate ending for the context of the sentence, like this:

Thank you, but I already ate breakfast.

Or, in Spanish, with the verb *desayunar* (to eat breakfast):

Gracias, pero ya desayuné⁵.

Now, the -er and -ir verb classes:

These two classes are often lumped together because they are identical in almost all instances.

For now, here is the general way these two classes conjugate for the preterit:

	First person ("I" and "We")	Second person ("You" and "Y'all")	Third person ("He/She/It" and "They")
Singular	-í	-iste	-ió
Plural	-imos	-ieron	-ieron

Here's an example of a common verb from this verb class (*beber*):

Ayer tú bebiste toda la leche. Ahora no tenemos nada...

Or, in English:

You drank all the milk yesterday. Now we don't have any...

Ultimately, whether it's an -er verb like *beber* or an -ir verb like *decidir*, you use the same ending forms 99% of the time.

³ These tildes or accent marks are important. It's the only difference between (yo) *hablo* and (él/ella/usted) *habló*

⁴ Notice that the *nosotros* form of the verb has no change between present and preterit tenses.

⁵ Remember that because Spanish is so specific with its verb endings, we can often drop the pronoun of the sentence, which in this sentence would normally be "yo".

Following the usual conjugation steps:

Step 1: take off the ending

Normally, in Spanish homework, we encounter **infinitives**, or verbs that end with the letter **R**, like *vivir*, *hablar*, or *comer*. The very first step in the process, like when we conjugate for the present tense, is to remove the last two letters, whether it be an -ir, an -er, or an -ar. For this example, our homework wants us to figure out what form to put into the blank

En la semana pasada, el hombre _____ (**comprar**) un carro nuevo.

If we follow the first step, we end up with **compr-**.

Step 2: figure out who/what is the subject of the sentence

In this sentence, and in most sentences in subject-verb-object languages, the subject of the sentence is usually going to be **before the verb**, which we already know is the **blue word**.

In this case, it's "el hombre", which means "the man". Since it's a singular person, who is neither YOU (the person the speaker is talking to) nor the speaker themselves, it must be a **third person singular**⁶.

Step 3: choose the ending that fits the subject of the sentence

A conjugation chart in your textbook or online might look more like this:

	Preterite
yo	<u>compré</u>
tú	compraste
él/ella/Ud.	<u>compró</u>
nosotros	<u>compramos</u>
vosotros	<u>comprasteis</u>
ellos/ellas/Uds.	compraron

It's simple enough to follow this chart if we know which word means "he".

A more effective strategy that we can use in conversation, though, is to gain muscle memory with changing the endings. Use the -ar chart on the previous page to see if you can find which ending to stick on the end of your **compr-**.

Step 4: fill in the blank

The last step is to fill in the blank with your newly formed word. Try this out on your own! The answer is on the next page so you can see if you got the right word. Good luck!

⁶ Another way to figure this out is to ask yourself, "Is this a YOU, an "I", a THEY, a WE, or a HE/SHE/IT?"

Irregulars to be aware of

While many preterit forms follow the above-outlined patterns, there are a handful important irregular verbs that do **not** abide by these patterns. Here is an important list of irregulars that you should be aware of:

<i>Infinitive form</i>	<i>Stem for all preterite forms</i>
<i>andar</i> (to walk)	<i>anduv-</i>
<i>estar</i> (to be)	<i>estuv-</i>
<i>tener</i> (to have)	<i>tuv-</i>
<i>poner</i> (to put)	<i>pus-</i>
<i>poder</i> (to be able)	<i>pud-</i>
<i>saber</i> (to know)	<i>sup-</i>
<i>caber</i> (to fit)	<i>cup-</i>

This list gets you to the **first step** from the last page.

The best way to get these new patterns jogged into your brain is to practice these ones a bit extra. Here's a link to [a helpful quiz](#) on irregular preterit forms in Spanish⁷.

Summary

Now that you're an expert on conjugating the present tense, the preterit should come a bit more naturally for you. The preterit is one of the most important expressions you'll learn in Spanish because it allows you one way to talk about the past.

Although you will learn many more tenses and verbal aspects, they aren't all as difficult as the preterit is, so have faith, and remember: practice helps!

Here's a low stakes [quiz](#) that you can use to practice⁸.

Lastly, the answer to the practice on the previous page is [compró](#).

⁷ If you're accessing this resource in print, you can find this quiz at <https://www.spanishdict.com/quizzes/62/spanish-preterite-stem-changes> or by Googling "SpanishDict Preterit irregular quiz"

⁸ If you're accessing this resource in print, you can find this quiz at <https://www.spanishdict.com/quizzes/60/preterite-tense-forms> or by Googling "SpanishDict Preterit Quiz"