

5

Passé Composé and Imperfect Tenses Compared

The basic uses of the **passé composé** and the imperfect tenses are summarized in the chart below:

PASSÉ COMPOSÉ

1. Expresses specific actions or events that were started and completed at a definite point in the past:

Elle a préparé le dîner.
She prepared dinner.

2. Expresses a specific action or event at a specific point in past time:

Aujourd'hui il est sorti à 8 h.
Today he went out at 8 o'clock.
Elle a joué du piano hier matin.
She played the piano yesterday morning.

IMPERFECT

1. Describes ongoing or continuous actions or events in the past:

Elle préparait le dîner.
She was preparing dinner.

2. Describes habitual or repeated actions or events in the past:

Il sortait d'habitude à 8 h.
He customarily went out at 8 o'clock.
Elle jouait du piano chaque jour.
She played (would play) the piano every day.

3. Describes persons, things, conditions, or state of mind:

Il était triste.
He was sad.
Le ciel était bleu.
The sky was blue.
Elle voulait étudier la musique.
She wanted to study music.
Il avait mal aux dents.
He had a toothache.

NOTE:

1. The **passé composé** is usually equivalent to an English simple past and the imperfect to English was (were) . . . ing, used to, and would (meaning used to):

Hier il a plu toute la journée.
Il pleuvait pendant qu'ils jouaient au tennis.
Il pleuvait beaucoup en avril.

Yesterday it rained all day.
It was raining while they played (were playing) tennis.
It used to rain (would rain) a lot in April.

2. The **passé composé** expresses an action or event repeated a specific number of times in the past:

La semaine dernière Henri est allé au cinéma quatre fois.

Last week Henri went to the movies four times.

CHAPTER 5: *Passé Composé* and Imperfect Tenses Compared

But:

Henri *allait* au cinéma *tous les dimanches*.

Henri went (used to go) to the movies every Sunday.

3. The following words and expressions often require the use of the **passé composé**:

l'année passée (dernière) last year
avant-hier the day before yesterday
d'abord at first
enfin finally
ensuite then, next
l'été (l'hiver) passé last summer
 (winter)
finalement finally
une (deux . . .) fois once, one (two) time(s)

plusieurs fois several times
hier yesterday
hier soir last night
l'autre jour the other day
ce jour-là that day
un jour one day
le mois passé (dernier) last month
la semaine passée (dernière) last week
soudain suddenly
tout à coup suddenly, all of a sudden

4. The imperfect is generally used with the following adverbial expressions, which may imply repetition:

autrefois formerly
chaque jour (semaine, mois, année)
 each day (week, month, year)
de temps à autre from time to time
de temps en temps from time to time
d'habitude usually
d'ordinaire usually, ordinarily
en ce temps-là at that time
en général generally
fréquemment frequently

généralement generally
habituellement habitually
parfois sometimes, every now and then
quelquefois sometimes
souvent often
toujours always
tous les jours (mois) every day (month)
tout le temps all the time

5. The imperfect tense is used to describe a situation that was going on in the past when another action or event took place. The action or event that took place is in the **passé composé**:

Je faisais mes devoirs quand le téléphone a sonné.
J'avais tellement mal aux dents que j'ai dû aller chez le dentiste.

I was doing my homework when the telephone rang.
 I had such a toothache that I had to go to the dentist.

6. The imperfect is used with verbs that express a state of mind in progress in the past:

aimer to like, love
croire to believe
désirer to desire
espérer to hope
être to be
penser to think

pouvoir to be able, can
préférer to prefer
regretter to regret, be sorry
savoir to know (how)
vouloir to wish, want

Il pensait toujours à elle.
Je savais qu'il ne pouvait pas venir.

He always thought of her.
 I knew he couldn't come.

When these verbs express a state of mind occurring at a specific point in the past, the **passé composé** is used:

Pour ce travail il **a tout de suite pensé** à elle.
 Il **n'a pas pu venir** hier.

For this job, he immediately thought of her.
 He couldn't come yesterday.