

Verbs that Change Meaning Between the Preterit and Imperfect Tenses

Even though these verbs can be used in either tense, they have different definitions depending on whether the preterit or imperfect tense is used.

Preterit

Imperfect

met (a person)

Conocer

knew (a person)

Juan la conoció.

John met her.

Juan conocía a Marta.

John knew Marta.

(failed) managed

(No) Poder

was (un)able

(No) Pude lavar el baño.

I (failed) managed to clean the bathroom.

(No) Podía lavar el baño.

I was (un)able to clean the bathroom.

(refused) tried

(No) Querer

wanted

(No) Quisimos llamar a nuestra madre.

We (refused) tried to call our mom.

Queríamos llamar a nuestra madre.

We wanted to call our mom.

found out

Saber

knew (information)

Supieron la verdad.

They found out the truth.

Sabían la verdad.

They knew the truth.

got/received

Tener

had

Tuviste una carta.

You received a letter.

Tenías una carta.

You had a letter.

Ser and estar in the preterit or imperfect?

Preterit (action)	Imperfect (background)
<p style="text-align: center;">Ser</p> <p style="text-align: center;">fui fuimos fuiste fuisteis fue fueron</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Date, ¿Cómo fue?, passive voice, (Fue escrito por... was written by...)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Ser</p> <p style="text-align: center;">era éramos eras erais era eran</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Nationality, color, physical description, time of day, impersonal expression, personality, religion, occupation, 'cuando era niño'</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Estar</p> <p style="text-align: center;">estuve estuvimos estuviste estuvisteis estuvo estuvieron</p> <p style="text-align: center;">RARELY USED! Location, emotion, or state within a specific limited time</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Estar</p> <p style="text-align: center;">estaba estábamos estabas estabais estaba estaban</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Location, emotion, with past progressive (-ando/-iendo), temporary states ("la puerta estaba abierta")</p>