

# FRENCH IMPERFECT TENSE



## French Imperfect Tense

*L'imparfait* - the French imperfect tense - is one of the ways you can speak in the past. You may have already learned the *passé composé*, which is used in a different context.


What's the difference between the *imparfait* and the *passé composé*?

- The *imparfait* does not require a *helping verb*.
- The *imparfait* does not have a *past participle*.
- The *imparfait* is used to give descriptions about the past.
- The *passé composé* is used to talk about things that happened.

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- Use the *passé composé* to talk about things that had a definite beginning and a definite ending.
- Use the *passé composé* to talk about a sequence of events.

### Sample sequence of events in the *passé composé*:

I got up this morning.	Je me suis levé(e) ce matin.
I brushed my teeth.	Je <u>me suis brossé</u> les dents.
I got dressed.	Je <u>me suis habillé(e)</u> .
I went to work.	Je <u>suis allé(e)</u> au travail.

Add description to the sequence of events using the *imparfait*. The *imparfait* is what makes the sequence of events interesting!

English	Passé composé What happened	Imparfait Description
When I woke up this morning,	Quand <u>je me suis levé(e)</u> ce matin,	
I really didn't want to get out of		Je ne <u>voulais</u> vraiment pas

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bed because I was tired.		sortir du lit parce que j' <u>étais</u> fatigué(e).
I got up anyway,	Je <u>me suis levé(e)</u> quand même,	
and I went into the kitchen.	et je <u>suis allé(e)</u> dans la cuisine.	
When I got in there, it was dark and I was afraid,	Quand j'y <u>suis arrivé(e)</u> ,	il <u>faisait</u> noir et j'avais peur,
but I made the coffee anyway.	mais j' <u>ai fait</u> le café de toute façon.	

## When exactly should you use the *imparfait*?

Use the *imparfait* to say someone *was doing* something.  
 WAS + VERB-ing, WERE + VERB-ing:

I was walking.	Je marchais.
He was reading.	Il lisait.
She was eating.	Elle mangeait.

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Also use the *imparfait* to express what you used to do. These are not things that only happened once or twice.

When I was little,	Quand j' <u>étais</u> petit(e),
in the summer I used to always go to my grandmother's house,	pendant l'été j' <u>allais</u> toujours chez ma grand-mère,
and we would always climb to the top of a tree and spy on people.	et nous <u>grimpions</u> toujours en haut d'un arbre pour espionner des gens.

Remember, the *passé composé* is used to give a sequence of events that had specific beginnings and endings.

Once, when I was ten years old,	
<b><i>imparfait</i></b>	Une fois, quand j' <u>avais</u> 10 ans
I caught a cricket and I ate it!	
<b><i>passé composé</i></b>	J' <u>ai attrapé</u> un cricket et je l' <u>ai mangé</u> !

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## Forming the *imparfait*

👉 There is only ONE irregular verb in the *imparfait*: ÊTRE

👉 Besides the verb ÊTRE, what are the last three letters of all verbs in the present tense NOUS form?

- To form the *stem* to which you will add the *imperfect endings*, you need to know the present tense NOUS form of the verb in question.
- Find the NOUS form of the verb, take off the -ONS, and there you have your *stem*.

finir	nous finissons	finiss-
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## Imperfect endings chart

(JE) <u>verb</u> + AIS	(NOUS) <u>verb</u> + IONS
(TU) <u>verb</u> + AIS	(VOUS) <u>verb</u> + IEZ
(IL - ELLE - ON) <u>verb</u> + AIT	(ILS - ELLES) <u>verb</u> + AIENT

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<p>I was finishing my homework.</p> <p>I used to finish my homework.</p>	<p>Je <u>finissais</u> mes devoirs.</p>
<p>You were finishing your homework.</p> <p>You used to finish your homework.</p>	<p>Tu <u>finissais</u> tes devoirs.</p>
<p>He was finishing his homework.</p> <p>She used to finish her homework.</p> <p>We were finishing our homework.</p>	<p>Il <u>finissait</u> ses devoirs.</p> <p>Elle <u>finissait</u> ses devoirs.</p> <p>On <u>finissait</u> nos devoirs.</p>
<p>We were finishing our homework.</p> <p>We used to finish our homework.</p>	<p>Nous <u>finissions</u> nos devoirs.</p>
<p>You were finishing your homework.</p> <p>You used to finish your</p>	<p>Vous <u>finissiez</u> vos devoirs.</p>

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homework.	
They were finishing their homework.	Ils <u>finissaient</u> leurs devoirs.
They used to finish their homework.	

## Pronouncing the *imparfait* endings

Which four endings sound exactly the same?

<b><u>AIS</u></b>	IONS
<b><u>AIS</u></b>	IEZ
<b><u>AIT</u></b>	<b><u>AIENT</u></b>

ÊTRE is the only irregular verb in the *imparfait*.

👉 Pourquoi? What is the present tense NOUS form of *être*?

We are	Nous sommes
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👉 ÊTRE is the only verb that doesn't end in -ONS in the present tense.

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## ÊTRE conjugation in the *imperfect*

I was	J'étais
You were	Tu étais
He was	Il était
She was	Elle était
We were	On était
We were	Nous étions
You were	Vous étiez
They were	Ils étaient
They were	Elles étaient

## Verbs ending in -CER: **COMMENCER**

👉 The present tense NOUS form has a spelling change that remains in the imperfect.

Present: nous commençions STEM: COMMENÇ-	je commençais
	tu commençais

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	il commençait
	nous commençons
	vous commencez
	ils commençaient

## Verbs ending in -GER: *MANGER*

👉 The present tense NOUS form has a spelling change that remains in the imperfect.

Present: nous mangeons STEM: MANGE-	je mangeais
	tu mangeais
	il mangeait
	nous mangions
	vous mangiez
	ils mangeaient

## Verbs ending in -IER: *ÉTUDIER*

👉 These verbs just look FUNNY in the imperfect.

Present:	
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nous étudions STEM: ÉTUDI-	j'étudiais
	tu étudiais
	il étudiait
	nous étudions
	vous étudiez
	ils étudiaient

Expressions that imply repetition or habitual actions in the past

autrefois	in the past
chaque jour	every day
chaque semaine	every week
chaque année	every year
de temps en temps	from time to time
d'habitude	usually
en général	generally
fréquemment	frequently
généralement	generally
habituellement	habitually

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parfois	sometimes
quelquefois	sometimes
souvent	often
toujours	always
tous les jours	every day
tous les mois	every month
tout le temps	all the time

## Examples

<p>lire = to read</p> <p>Find the stem: NOUS LIS<u>ONS</u></p> <p>Take off the -ONS STEM: LIS-</p> <p>ADD THE ENDINGS</p>	<p>I was reading the newspaper.</p> <p>Je <u>lisais</u> le journal.</p> <p>We were reading a good book.</p> <p>Nous <u>lisions</u> un bon livre.</p> <p>They were reading a magazine.</p> <p>Ils <u>lisaient</u> un magazine.</p>
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## Using the *imparfait* and the *passé composé* together

We were reading the magazine.	On <u>lisait</u> le magazine.
when the phone rang.	quand le téléphone <u>a</u> <u>sonné</u> .

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