Description of an Event: Passé composé or Imperfect

Passé composé

The **passé composé** tells what happened and narrates the action. Use it to describe:

- specific events
- the main actions of a story

Imperfect

The imperfect sets the scene and gives background information. Use it to describe:

- external conditions: date, weather, time, scenery
- descriptions of the characters: age, physical traits, health, attitudes, appearance, clothing, feelings, intentions
- background activities: what people were doing, what was going on

The Imperfect and the passé composé in the Same Sentence

To describe a past event, you can use both the **passé composé** and the imperfect in the same sentence.

Ex.: SPECIFIC ACTION (what people did) — ONGOING OR PROGRESSIVE ACTION (what was happening)

J'ai vu un accident . . . pendant que j'attendais le bus.

Note: Depending on what action is being described, either the **passé composé** or the imperfect may be used after **quand.**

Ex.: **J'ai téléphoné quand tu mangeais. / Je mangeais quand tu es parti.**

The passé simple

Like the **passé composé,** the **passé simple** describes what people did, what happened.

The **passé simple** of regular **-er, -ir,** and **-re** verbs is formed as follows:

parler	
parlai	parlâmes
parlas	parlâtes
parla	parlèrent

finir	
finis	finîmes
finis	finîtes
finit	finirent

répondre	
répondis	répondîmes
répondis	répondîtes
répondit	répondirent

For most irregular verbs, the stem of the **passé simple** is similar to the past participle:

aller (allé)	il alla	ils allèrent
avoir (eu)	il eut	ils eurent
prendre (pris)	il prit	ils prirent
recevoir (reçu)	il reçut	ils reçurent

The following are common irregular forms.

être	il fut	ils furent
faire	il fit	ils firent
venir	il vint	ils vinrent
voir	il vit	ils virent

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Review of the passé composé

Use the **passé composé** to describe what people did, what happened.

- To form it, use the present form of **avoir** or **être** and the past participle of the verb.

  Ex.: **J'ai mangé. / Nous sommes sorti(e)s.**

Note: The following verbs take **être** or **avoir** in the **passé composé** depending on the meaning: **sortir, monter, descendre, passer.** All the following verbs take **être** in the **passé composé: aller, venir, arriver, partir, entrer, tomber, rester, rentrer, retourner, revenir, devenir, naître, mourir.**

- All reflexive verbs take **être** in the **passé composé.**

  Ex.: **Vous vous êtes amusé(e)(s).**

Note: When the verb uses **être** in the **passé composé,** the past participle agrees in number and gender with the subject of the verb. In all negative statements **ne ... pas** goes around the auxiliary verb. In reflexive verbs, **ne** comes before the reflexive pronouns.

Ex.: **Je n'ai pas mangé. / Tu ne t'es pas amusé(e).**

Placement of Adverbs

- Most adverbs come immediately after the auxiliary verb in the **passé composé.**

  Ex.: **Nous nous sommes beaucoup amusé(e)s.**

- The adverbs **tôt** and **tard** come after the past participle in the **passé composé.**

  Ex.: **Nathalie s'est couchée tôt.**

Review of the Imperfect

The imperfect is used to describe:

- what people used to do, what used to be
- what people were doing, what was going on, what was happening

Review of the Formation of the Imperfect

The imperfect stem is formed as follows: **nous**-form of the present tense minus **-ons.** To this stem add the endings for the imperfect.

PRESENT **nous**-FORM	IMPERFECT STEM +	ENDINGS =		IMPERFECT FORMS OF **avoir**	
avoir					
nous avons →	av-	-ais	-ions	j'avais	nous avions
		-ais	-iez	tu avais	vous aviez
		-ait	-aient	il/elle/on avait	ils/elles avaient

Être is the only irregular verb in the imperfect:

j'étais	nous étions
tu étais	vous étiez
il/elle/on était	ils/elles étaient

Usage of the passé composé and the Imperfect

IMPERFECT

- habitual or repeated actions (what people used to do)
- progressive actions (what was going on)

PASSÉ COMPOSÉ

- specific actions (what people did)

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