



FRENCH · LEVEL 3

Lesson 3

The imperfect and how it differs from the passé composé —
the two past tenses and when to use which

● Formation

● Uses

● Contrast

● Storytelling

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INTRODUCTION

The second past tense

After the *passé composé* comes the **imparfait** — French's second major past tense. They are not interchangeable: the *passé composé* tells you **what happened**, the *imparfait* describes **what things were like**.

English has no single equivalent, which is why this tense trips people up. Your closest matches are “I **used to** go” and “I **was** going” — the *imparfait* covers both, plus every description in the past. Where English says “it was cold and it was raining”, French says *il faisait froid et il pleuvait*: two *imparfaits*.

The good news: the *imparfait* is **almost entirely regular**. There is exactly one exception in the whole language. After the irregular participles of Lesson 2, this is a rest.

Chapter 1 — How it is formed

Chapter 2 — When it is used

Chapter 3 — *Imparfait* or *passé composé*

Chapter 4 — Exercises

Lesson 2 is a prerequisite: you need the *passé composé* to see the contrast.

CHAPTER 1

How it is formed

One rule, one exception, no lists to memorise. The imparfait is the easiest French tense to build.

1 The rule: first person plural minus **-ONS**

Take the verb in the present, first person plural (*nous*), drop **-ONS** and add the endings. Parler: nous parl**ons** → parl- · Finir: nous finiss**ons** → finiss- · Prendre: nous pren**ons** → pren-

The essentials : It works for every verb without exception — irregulars included.

2 The endings: **-ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient**

Je parlais · Tu parlais · Il / Elle parlait · Nous parlions · Vous parliez · Ils / Elles parlaient.

Dictation trap : Listen carefully: *-ais, -ait* and *-aient* all sound identical. The difference exists only in writing.

3 The one exception: **ÊTRE**

Être doesn't follow the rule (*nous sommes* has no *-ons*). The stem is **ét-**: *j'étais, tu étais, il était, nous étions, vous étiez, ils étaient.*

Just one : That is the only irregular verb in the entire imperfect. Everything else follows the rule.

4 Spelling quirks

Verbs in **-GER** add an E before A: *manger* → *je mangeais*, *nous mangions*. Verbs in **-CER** take a cedilla: *commencer* → *je commençais*.

Why : The reason is phonetic: without the E and the cedilla, G and C would harden.

5 Verbs in -IER and -YER

With *nous* and *vous* a double I appears: *étudier* → *nous étudiions*, *vous étudiez* · *payer* → *nous payions*.

Not a typo : It looks odd but it is correct: the stem ends in I and the ending starts with I.

The four forms to recognise

Parler (1st gr.): *je parlais* · *nous parlions* · *ils parlaient*

Finir (2nd gr.): *je finissais* · *nous finissions* · *ils finissaient*

Prendre (3rd gr.): *je prenais* · *nous prenions* · *ils prenaient*

Être (exception): *j'étais* · *nous étions* · *ils étaient*

One rule, one exception — that is the entire imperfect.

What really matters

→ The stem comes from the first person plural of the present, minus -ONS.

→ The endings are the same for every verb in the language.

→ Être is the only exception.

CHAPTER 2

When it is used

The imparfait doesn't narrate events: it describes the setting, the habits and the states. If the passé composé is a photograph of an action, the imparfait is the background it happens against.

1 Description in the past

Setting, weather, appearance, condition: *Il faisait froid et il pleuvait* — it was cold and it was raining · *La maison était grande* · *Elle portait une robe rouge*.

Spotting it : Anything answering “what was it like” takes the imparfait.

2 Repeated action or habit

What used to happen regularly: *Quand j'étais petit, j'allais à la mer chaque été* — when I was little, I used to go to the sea every summer.

Key equivalence : This is your “used to”. French has no separate structure for it — the imparfait does the job.

3 Action in progress

Something that was going on, with no stated end: *Je regardais la télé* — I was watching TV · *Elle attendait le bus*.

Second equivalence : This is your past continuous. French has no “was + -ing”: again, the imparfait covers it.

4 Thoughts, feelings and states

State verbs almost always take the imparfait in a narrative: *Je savais pas* — I didn't know · *Je voulais partir* · *Il était fatigué* · *Elle avait peur*.

Worth memorising : *Savoir, vouloir, pouvoir, croire, penser, aimer, être, avoir* — with these, the imparfait is the default.

5 Politeness and suggestions

Two uses outside narrative: *Je voulais vous demander quelque chose* — I wanted to ask you something (softer than *je veux*) · *Si on allait au cinéma ?* — how about going to the cinema?

Very useful : That second structure, *Si + imparfait*, is the standard way to suggest something in French.

The words that signal the imparfait

Habit: toujours · souvent · d'habitude · chaque jour · tous les matins · le samedi

Description: c'était · il y avait · il faisait · pendant que · comme

State: je savais · je voulais · je pouvais · j'étais · j'avais

If the sentence describes rather than narrates — imparfait.

What really matters

- The imparfait covers both your “used to” and your past continuous.
- It describes setting, habits and states, never events.
- Verbs of thought and state take the imparfait by default in a story.

CHAPTER 3

Imparfait or passé composé

This is the real difficulty of the lesson. Both tenses often appear in the same sentence — and the choice changes the meaning, not just the style.

1 Background and event in one sentence

The imparfait sets the scene, the passé composé brings the event: *Je regardais la télé quand le téléphone a sonné* — I was watching TV when the phone rang.

Familiar ground : English marks this the same way: past continuous for the long action, simple past for the short one.

2 Habit versus a single occasion

Quand j'étais petit, j'allais à la mer chaque été (used to go) versus *L'été dernier, je suis allé à la mer* (went, once).

The test : Same verb, two tenses — the difference is whether the action repeated.

3 State versus change

Il avait peur — he was afraid (state) versus *Il a eu peur* — he got scared (the moment fear arrives).

Subtle but real : Same with *savoir*: *je savais* = I knew · *j'ai su* = I found out. The tense changes the verb's meaning.

4 Description versus narration

In a text the two alternate: *Il **faisait** nuit. La rue **était** vide. Soudain, une voiture **est arrivée** et **s'est arrêtée** devant la maison.*

How it looks in text : The first two sentences describe the scene, the next two set it moving.

5 One question to check

Ask yourself: **did it happen, or was it simply the case?** It happened → passé composé. It was the case → imparfait.

Practical rule : Rule of thumb: where English uses “was doing” or “used to do”, French uses the imparfait.

The two tenses side by side

PASSÉ COMPOSÉ — event, single action, change, something that happened and finished

IMPARFAIT — description, habit, state, action in progress with no stated end

Hier, il pleuvait (background) et je suis resté à la maison (event).

One event against the background of one state: the classic shape of a French narrative sentence.

What really matters

→ Long action in the imparfait, short interrupting action in the passé composé.

→ Habit → imparfait. One occasion → passé composé.

→ The check question: did it happen, or was it simply the case?

CHAPTER 4

Exercises

Do them without looking at the answers. Choosing between the two tenses is learned only by writing full sentences.

1 Form the imperfect

1. parler (je) 2. finir (nous) 3. prendre (ils) 4. être (tu) 5. manger (je)
6. commencer (il)

Answers : 1. je parlais · 2. nous finissions · 3. ils prenaient · 4. tu étais ·
5. je mangeais · 6. il commençait

2 Imparfait or passé composé?

1. Quand j'___ (être) petit, j'___ (aller) à la mer chaque été. 2. Hier, il
___ (pleuvoir) et je ___ (rester) à la maison. 3. Je ___ (regarder) la télé
quand le téléphone ___ (sonner).

Answers : 1. étais / allais · 2. pleuvait (background) / suis resté (event) ·
3. regardais (background) / a sonné (event)

3 State or change?

1. Il ___ (avoir) peur toute la nuit. 2. Quand il ___ (voir) le chien, il ___
(avoir) peur. 3. Je ne ___ (savoir) pas la réponse. 4. Hier, je ___
(savoir) la vérité.

Answers : 1. avait (was afraid) · 2. a vu / a eu (got scared) · 3. savais
(knew) · 4. j'ai su (found out)

4 Complete the story

Il ____ (faire) nuit. La rue ____ (être) vide. Soudain, une voiture ____ (arriver) et ____ (s'arrêter) devant la maison.

Answers : faisait / était (description) · est arrivée / s'est arrêtée (events)

5 Translate into French

1. When I was little, I used to walk to school. 2. It was cold and it was raining. 3. I was reading when he arrived. 4. I didn't know the answer.

Answers : 1. Quand j'étais petit, j'allais à l'école à pied. · 2. Il faisait froid et il pleuvait. · 3. Je lisais quand il est arrivé. · 4. Je ne savais pas la réponse.

How to work through this lesson

Day 1: read the lesson and do the exercises without looking at the answers.

Day 3: redo exercise 2 — the contrast between the two tenses needs repetition.

Day 7: describe a childhood memory in five sentences, alternating both tenses.

A childhood memory is the ideal exercise: habits in the imparfait, specific events in the passé composé.

What really matters

- The two tenses are learned together: their meaning lies in the contrast.
- Writing full sentences is essential: the choice only shows in context.
- A childhood memory is the best practical test of this lesson.

CONCLUSION

What you can do now

What you can do now

- ☐ Form the imperfect of any verb, irregulars included
- ☐ Recognise the one exception: être
- ☐ Describe settings, habits and states in the past
- ☐ Choose between imparfait and passé composé by meaning
- ☐ Make polite suggestions with Si + imparfait

To practise this week

- ☐ Describe a childhood memory in five sentences, alternating both tenses
- ☐ Redo exercise 2 without looking at the answers
- ☐ Listen out for it: spoken French alternates the two tenses constantly

What comes next

- ☐ Lesson 4: the conditional — politeness, hypothesis and Si + imparfait
- ☐ The cheat sheets download separately from domaformalis.com

The five things not to forget

1. The stem: first person plural of the present, minus -ONS.
2. Endings for every verb: -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient.
3. One exception only: être → j'étais.
4. The imparfait describes, the passé composé narrates.
5. Where English says “used to” or “was doing”, French says imparfait.

These five points cover nearly every case you'll meet in a story.

This lesson follows and expands the course of Yasmine, a French and Spanish teacher based in Sofia. The explanations are built around the contrast between the two past tenses and completed with corrected exercises.

To go further, find the **cheat sheets** on Domaformalis, and get in touch if you'd like live lessons with a teacher.

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