

Online French courses

level A1 to C1

How to use the *imparfait* in French

The past tenses in French

The different past tenses in French do not necessarily correspond to the English past tenses. Among them, we find the *passé composé*, the *imparfait*, the *passé simple*, the *plus-que-parfait*, the *passé antérieur*... This module focuses only on the *imparfait* for the other tenses, just have a look at the corresponding modules!

So, let's start. The *imparfait* can be translated in different ways :

I used to eat a lot = *je mangeais beaucoup* (habit in the past)

He was running when I saw him = *Il courait quand je l'ai vu* (action going on at a certain moment in the past)

Two centuries ago, people didn't have cars = *Les gens n'avaient pas de voitures il y a deux siècles*. (a state in the past)

The context will tell you how the verb in the *imparfait* is to be understood.

How to build the *imparfait*?

The basic rule is:

- take the stem of the verb in the present tense with the first person plural (the stem of the verb with "we" in the present tense)
- add the following endings according to the subject:

je -ais

tu -ais

il/elle/on -ait

nous -ions

vous -iez

ils/elles -aient

Good to know! For ils/elles, the *-ent* is mute. This means that *-aient* is simply pronounced "è", like *-ais* and *-ait*

Let's take an example with a verb for each of the three groups.

1st group: verbs ending in -er , like *arriver* (to arrive/to happen)

- In the present tense with "we", it is *nous arrivons*. By removing the *-ons*, we have the stem *arriv*, which will be used for the *imparfait*. Then we add the correct endings :

je arriv +ais = j'arrivais

tu arriv +ais = tu arrivais

il/elle/on arriv +ait = il/elle/on arrivait

nous arriv +ions = nous arrivions

vous arriv +iez = vous arriviez

ils/elles arriv +aient = ils/elles arrivaient

2nd group, verbs ending in *-ir* following the pattern of *finir* (to finish / to end)

- In the present tense with "we", it is *nous finissons*. By removing the *-ons*, we have the stem *finiss*, which will be used for the *imparfait*. Then we add the correct endings:

je finiss +ais = je finissais

tu finiss +ais = tu finissais

il/elle/on finiss +ait = il/elle/on finissait

nous finiss +ions = nous finissions

vous finiss +iez = vous finissiez

ils/elles finiss +aient = ils/elles finissaient

3rd group, irregular verbs. Let's do it with *prendre* (to take)

- In the present tense with "we", it is *nous prenons*. By removing the *-ons*, we have the stem *pren*, which will be used for the *imparfait*. Then we add the correct endings:

je pren +ais = je prenais

tu pren +ais = tu prenais

il/elle/on pren +ait = il/elle/on prenait

nous pren +ions = nous prenions

vous pren +iez = vous preniez

ils/elles pren +aient = ils/elles prenaient

As you can see with those three examples, the *imparfait* is one of the easiest tense to use in French as it follows just one pattern. The only irregular verb is *être* (to be):

j'étais

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

Three particular cases

The verbs ending in *-cer* takes *ç* with "we" in the present tense, like *avancer* (to move forward / go forward) = *nous avançons*. If we follow the rule to build the *imparfait*, the stem should retain the *ç*, which is the case except for *nous* and *vous*. The reason is that *ç* can only appear before *a* or *o*, but never before *e*, *i* or *u*. Thus:

j'avançais
tu avançais
il/elle/on avançait
nous avançions
vous avançiez
ils/elles avançaient

Verbs in *-ger* have a similar irregularity. Let's have a look at *manger* (to eat). In the present tense, it is *nous mangeons*. The stem used for the *imparfait* is *mange*. However, *ge* can appear only before *a* and *o*, but never before *e*, *i* or *u*. Thus, the *e* is removed for *nous* and *vous*:

je mangeais
tu mangeais
il/elle/on mangeait
nous mangions
vous mangiez
ils/elles mangeaient

falloir (to express a necessity) and *pleuvoir* (to rain) exist only with *il* and don't have a form with *nous*. In the *imparfait*, they will become *il fallait* and *il pleuvait*.

When to use the *imparfait*?

The *imparfait* is used in four past contexts:

- to express two simultaneous actions in the past

Example: *Lorsque vous étiez à Saint-Malo, je séjournais à Cannes.* = When you were in Saint-Malo, I was staying in Cannes.

The first action "*être à Saint-Malo*" was happening at the same time as the second action "*séjourner à Cannes*".

- to express a habit or a repeated action in the past:

Example: *Au Moyen Age, les hivers étaient rudes.* = In the Middle-Ages, winters were harsh.

Those winters were "repeated", or it was usual in the past (the Middle Ages) to have a harsh winter.

Example: *Quand j'étais petite, je jouais dans le jardin.* = When I was a child, I played / used to play in the garden.

Here we have a habit in the past ("used to play") which is now finished.

- to express that an action was going on at a certain moment in the past (equivalent to past continuous in English):

Example: *La nuit tombait...* = Night was falling...

Here we don't know when it started or when it finished. Night was just falling at that particular moment in the past.

- to express a state in the past, or to describe in the past:

Example: *Il pleuvait toute la journée* = It rained the whole day.

In this context, you have to be careful to make the distinction with the *passé composé*. Let's compare this sentence with *Il a plu toute la journée.* (*passé composé*)

With *imparfait*, we see the action of "raining" while it was happening in the past. We describe what the weather was during that particular day. With *passé composé*, we see the action of "raining" once it is finished. We say that on a certain day in the past, it rained, but that it is not the case anymore and it has nothing to do with the present moment.

Exemple: *La semaine dernière, il était malade.* = Last week, he was sick.

Here we simply describe his state ("sick") last week (in the past).

Careful! The *imparfait* can also be found in conditional contexts (if...). It is usually used to express the condition and the second verb will be in the *conditionnel présent*. See the module "Le conditionnel en français" to know more about this particular use.

Example: *Si je connaissais la réponse, je la donnerais.* = If I knew the answer, I would give it.

The condition, "*connaître*", is in the *imparfait*, while the second verbe "*donner*", what would happen if the condition proved to be true, is in the *conditionnel présent*.