The **IMPERFECT** is used primarily in three ways:

With **ACTIVE VERBS** (hablar, correr, comer, estudiar, escuchar, etc.)

1. **HABITUAL ACTION**
   - Expresses that the action used to occur habitually
   - Requires an extended period of time (a habit can’t develop in two days)
   - No focus on when action began or ended, or how long it lasted; just that it used to occur
     
     Ej.1 Cuando era niña, iba frecuentemente a Disneylandia.
     Ej.2 Cuando estaba en la universidad, normalmente estudiaba en la biblioteca.

2. **ACTION IN PROGRESS**
   - Expresses that an action was in the process of happening at a given moment
   - Requires a specific "moment", which may be one minute, a whole summer or a whole year; regardless, it’s presented as one block of time during which something was occurring; often, the “moment” is defined as the time at which some other action occurred (as in Ej. 3 below).
   - No focus on when action began or ended, or how long it lasted; just that it was in the process of occurring
   - Is interchangeable with the imperfect progressive (estaba hablando, estaba comiendo)

     Ej. 1 Anoche a las 8:00 mi familia y yo cenábamos (estábamos cenando).
     Ej. 2 Durante la primavera de 2005 me preparaba (me estaba preparando) para ir a Madrid.
     Ej. 3 Yo estudiaba (estaba estudiando) cuando me llamaste.

With **NON-ACTIVE VERBS** (estar, ser, querer, poder, tener, etc.) and, sometimes, **ACTIVE VERBS**

3. **SITUATION/CIRCUMSTANCES**
   - Describes what things were like: situations, circumstances
   - If the verb is active, it’s not presented as something that you were actively doing, but rather as a situation that existed for you (Ej. 2); this is sometimes perceived as a habitual action
   - No focus on when the situation began or ended, or how long it lasted; just that it existed
   - Often used to present supplementary information that helps explain why or under what circumstances some other action occurred; the “other action” is typically presented in the preterite (as in Ej. 4 below)

     Ej. 1 Cuando era niña, tenía dos perros.
     Ej. 2 Cuando vivía en México, trabajaba en una clínica veterinaria.
     Ej. 3 Ayer no quería hacer nada.
     Ej. 4 Ayer me quedé en casa todo el día porque no me sentía bien.

The **PRETERITE** is used primarily in two ways:

With **ACTIVE VERBS** (hablar, correr, comer, estudiar, escuchar, etc.)

1. **"MAIN EVENT"**
   - Expresses that an action occurred at a given time
   - The time mentioned is often a specific time (Ej. 1 below)
   - If the time mentioned is an extended period of time, the idea is that the action occurred at a specific or given point within that period of time (Ej. 2)
   - The duration of the action is often explicitly mentioned (Ej. 3)
   - The focus is on the action as a completed action: it began and ended
   - It may be a repeated action; in that case, the specific amount of times it occurred is often provided (Ej. 4)

     Ej. 1 Ayer salí de mi casa a las 8:00 de la mañana.
     Ej. 2 Cuando era niña mis padres se divorciaron.
     Ej. 3 El sábado pasado estudié por ocho horas.
     Ej. 4 El verano pasado fui a Disneylandia diez veces.
2. STATE OR CONDITION BECOMES THE "MAIN EVENT"

- Typically, when you mention a state or condition in the past, you’re using it to explain why or under what circumstances another action occurred (as in Section #3, Ej. 4 above). When the state or condition is what occurred, use the preterite (Ej. 1 & 2)
- Often, when you mention a physical, mental or emotional state or a situation or circumstance in the past, you’re not concerned about expressing specifically when it began or ended or how long it lasted, just that the state or situation existed. When you do want to focus on the first moment that the state or condition began to exist, or that an action actually took place, use the preterite (Ej. 3-5)
- Often in English, we’ll use completely different words to express the nuanced ideas.

Compare:

Ej. 1 Ayer me quedé en casa todo el día porque no me sentía bien. vs. Después de beber la tercera cerveza, no me sentí bien.
Ej. 2 Cuando estaba en Madrid, comí mucha paella. El verano pasado estuve en Madrid por un mes.
Ej. 3 Cuando estaba en la secundaria, podía correr cinco millas.
  - I’m only telling you about my capabilities; not about any particular time when I did the action. El fin de semana pasado pude correr cinco millas.
  - I’m telling you that I tried and was able to perform the action. By the way, compare “pude correr” with the following:
  - Here I also express that I performed the action, but the part about managing to accomplish it is absent, so it becomes a very different sentence.
  Ej. 4 El fin de semana pasado un amigo me invitó a una fiesta pero no quería ir.
  - I’m only telling you about my thoughts: you don’t know whether I ended up going or not. El fin de semana pasado un amigo me invitó a una fiesta pero no quise ir.
  - I’m telling you that I didn’t want to go, that I made a conscious decision not to go, and I didn’t go. By the way, compare “no quise ir” with the following:
  - Here I also express that I didn’t go, but I don’t communicate anything about why I didn’t go.
Ej. 5 Un amigo me invitó a almorzar pero no acepté porque tenía una cita con el doctor.
  - The appointment is a circumstance that existed that prevented me from accepting the invitation. La semana pasada tuve una cita con el doctor.
  - I never express, however, whether or not I ended up going to the doctor’s.

When there are TWO OR MORE VERBS TOGETHER in a sentence:

1. Two or more verbs in the preterite: Typically expresses a sequence of events. First this happened, then that, then the next, etc.

   Ej. 1 Ayer por la tarde, llegué a casa, me quité la ropa, me puse el pijama y empecé a relajarme.
   Ej. 2 Nací en Pomona; luego viví en Los Angeles, después viví en Davis, más tarde viví en Berkeley.
   Ej. 3 Cuando estaba en la escuela secundaria, tenía un coche VW Rabbit. Luego, tuve un Ford Mustang; después tuve un MG Midget; luego tuve un Mazda RX7; después tuve dos Nissan 280ZX; y finalmente compré un Toyota Prius.

Note how Ej. 3 begins with a situation, but then moves into a narration of which cars I had throughout my life. Also notice that “tuve” could be substituted at any time with “compré”.

2. Two or more verbs in the imperfect: Typically expresses simultaneous or concurrent actions or situations (i.e., they used to occur, were occurring or existed at the same time or within the same time period). There is no focus on which began or ended first. The word mientras is often used.
TO PRETERITE OR TO IMPERFECT, THAT IS THE QUESTION

Ej. 1 Yo lavaba los platos mientras mi esposo preparaba la comida.
Ej. 2 Cuando era niña, asistía a la escuela, jugaba con mis amigos y leía mucho.

3. Combination of preterite and imperfect: Most commonly expresses:
   A. A habitual action or a situation (imperfect) that, at some point, changed (preterite) (Ej. 1)
   B. An action that was in progress (imperfect) when something else happened (preterite) (Ej. 2)

   Ej. 1 Yo siempre llevaba mis pantalones morados, pero un día me puse los pantalones verdes.
   Ej. 2 Preparaba la cena cuando oí el teléfono.

HOW TO CHOOSE BETWEEN THE PRETERITE AND IMPERFECT

When you’re writing or completing a paragraph and have to decide whether to use the preterite or imperfect, one way to do it is to follow these steps:

1. Ask yourself:
   Is it an active or non-active verb?
   If it’s non-active, jump to step 5.

2. If it’s active, ask yourself:
   Is the action presented as a habitual action in the past (i.e., did this action used to happen)?
   Remember that you need to have an extended period of time for this usage.
   If it WAS a habitual action, use the imperfect.

3. If it wasn’t a habitual action, ask yourself:
   Is this action presented as an action in progress (i.e., was it in the process of occurring)?
   If it WAS in the process of occurring, use the imperfect.

4. If it WASN’T in the process of occurring, use the preterite.

5. If it’s a non-active verb, ask yourself:
   Is this just expressing a thought, feeling, condition, situation or circumstance in the past, or does this verb express something that actually occurred in the past?
   If the verb itself just expresses a thought, feeling, etc., use the imperfect.

6. If the non-active verb is presented as something that actually happened (i.e., the “main event”), use the preterite.

TWO FINAL THINGS TO REMEMBER

1. Both the preterite and imperfect are PAST tenses; both express actions or situations that are over.
   Ej. 1 Ayer por la tarde, llegué a casa, me quité la ropa, me puse el pijama y empecé a relajarme.
   - Obviously, each of these actions began and ended yesterday.
   Ej. 2 Cuando era niña, iba frecuentemente a Disneylandia.
   - I may still go to Disneyland now, but I do it as an adult, not as a little girl. The action of going to Disneyland “cuando era niña” is over.

2. Virtually nothing in life or in a Spanish class is 100%. These guidelines will help you the vast majority of the time, but there are always exceptions to any rule or pattern.