Uses of the preterite

The preterite is used to express the following:

1. A single action or a series of actions that are totally completed within a particular period of time in the past

Felipe **limpió** su cuarto ayer.	*Felipe cleaned his room yesterday.*
Tuve dos meses de vacaciones el año pasado.	*I had a two-month vacation last year.*

2. The beginning or the end of an action in the past

Empezó a llover a las tres.	*It began to rain at three o'clock.*
Terminé el informe esta mañana.	*I finished the report this morning.*

Some verbs have a different English equivalent in the preterite:

saber (*to know*; in the preterite: *found out*)

Yo no **sé** lo que pasó.	*I don't know what happened.*
Pedro **supo** lo que había pasado.	*Pedro found out what had happened.*

conocer (*to know, be acquainted with*; in the preterite: *met* [for the first time])

—Elena, ¿**conoces** al primo de Carlos?	*Elena, do you know Carlos's cousin?*
—Lo **conocí** anoche.	*I met him (made his acquaintance) last night (for the first time).*

poder (*to be able*; in the preterite: *succeeded in, managed to*)

Mis padres siempre **pueden** tomar el tren de las dos.	*My parents can always take the two o'clock train.*
Ayer no **pudieron** llegar a tiempo.	*Yesterday they did not manage to arrive on time.*

querer (*to want*; in the preterite: *tried*; in the negative preterite: *refused*)

¿**Quieres** ir conmigo?	*Do you want to go with me?*
Carolina **quiso** ir conmigo.	*Carolina tried to go with me.*
Eduardo **no quiso** ir conmigo.	*Eduardo refused to (would not) go with me.*

Common expressions with the preterite

Expressions that delineate a particular period of time in the past or indicate the beginning or the end of a past action are often used with the preterite. Some of these expressions are

entonces	anteayer	una vez
de momento	en febrero (marzo, abril, etc.)	anoche
ayer	el lunes (martes, miércoles, etc.) pasado	la semana pasada
aquel día (mes, año)	de repente	el mes/el año pasado
aquella semana	por fin	en 1954 (1999, etc.)
el otro día	una noche, un día	el 25 de julio, etc.

Uses of the imperfect

The imperfect tense is used to express the following:

1. Descriptions in the past
   Ellos **eran** muy simpáticos.   *They were (used to be) very kind.*

2. An action that went on for a period of time in the past that is not specific, with no reference to its beginning or end
   Él me **miraba** mientras yo **trataba** de   *He was looking at me while I was trying to pick up*
   recoger los papeles.   *the papers.*

3. A customary, habitual or indefinitely repeated action in the past. One of the best ways to recognize this use is to think of the English *used to, was,* or *would*
   Los domingos yo **caminaba** por la playa.   *On Sundays I used to (would) walk on the beach.*

4. The background or setting in which an action took place
   Hacía un viento tremendo cuando   *It was extremely windy when we left school.*
   salimos de la escuela.

   Elena **corría** por la acera y de repente   *Elena was running on the sidewalk and all of a*
   se cayó.   *sudden she fell.*

5. Time of day in the past
   Eran las tres de la tarde.   *It was three o'clock in the afternoon.*

6. Age in the past
   El director **tenía** sesenta años.   *The director was sixty years old.*

7. A mental or physical state of being in the past. In the past, nonaction verbs such as *saber, conocer, querer, estar, creer,* and *tener* are usually in the imperfect
   Tú no **conocías** Lima muy bien.   *You didn't know Lima very well.*
   Estaba alegre mientras **tenía** con·   *I was very happy while I had someone to play with.*
   quien jugar.

Common expressions with the imperfect

Expressions that emphasize the customary, habitual, or repetitive nature of a past action are often used with the imperfect. Some of these expressions are

generalmente	normalmente	a veces
constantemente	todos los días, todas las tardes, etc.	con frecuencia
siempre	cada día (semana, mes, etc.)	por lo general
todos los días	de costumbre	regularmente
frecuentemente	a menudo	