

The French Imperfect Tense (l'Imparfait)

Imparfait **ER** verbs

What is the imparfait?

It is a past tense referring to an action that took place over a certain period of time or used to be a habit. In English the equivalent would be 'I used to do this' or 'I was doing'.

How is it formed?

In order to form the **imparfait**, the correct endings need to be added to the **stem** of the verb.

What is the **stem** of an ER verb?

To find the stem of ER verbs find the present tense **nous** form of the verb, drop the **ons** and add the endings below.

The **endings** of the imparfait

- Je ais
- Tu ais
- Il ait
- Elle ait
- On ait
- Nous ions
- Vous iez
- Ils aient
- Elles aient

For example take the regular verb **regarder** – to watch - the nous form in the present tense is **regardons**, drop the **ons** and the stem is **regard**. Add the endings listed above to form the imparfait as detailed below.

- Je regard**ais** I used to watch, I was watching
- Tu regard**ais** you used to watch, you were watching
- Il regard**ait** he used to watch, he was watching
- Elle regard**ait** she used to watch, she was watching
- On regard**ait** we/one used to watch, we were/one was watching
- Nous regard**ions** we used to watch, we were watching
- Vous regard**iez** you used to watch, you were watching
- Ils regard**aient** they used to watch, they were watching
- Elles regard**aient** they used to watch, they were watching

Imparfait IR Verbs

To find the stem of **IR** verbs find the **nous** form of the present tense, remove the **ons** and add the imparfait endings listed on the previous page.

For example:

Finir - to finish

The **nous** form of **finir** in the present tense is : nous **finissons**.

Remove the “ons”, use the stem **finiss** and then add the imperfect endings.

- Je finissais I used to finish, I was finishing
- Tu finissais you used to finish, you were finishing
- Il finissait he used to finish, he was finishing
- Elle finissait she used to finish, she was finishing
- On finissait we/one used to finish, we were/one was finishing
- Nous finissions we used to finish, we were finishing
- Vous finissiez you used to finish, you were finishing
- Ils finissaient they used to finish, they were finishing
- Elles finissaient they used to finish, they were finishing

Other verbs from the IR group:

choisir (to choose) **garantir** (to guarantee) **vomir** (to vomit) **guérir** (to heal) **remplir** (to fill up)
maigrir (to lose weight) **obéir** (to obey) **punir** (to punish) **nourrir** (to nourish) **grossir** (to get fat)

Exceptions:

The following verbs belong to the **3rd group** (irregular verbs, see next page):

dormir (to sleep), **mourir** (to die), **sortir** (to go out), **ouvrir** (to open), **devenir** (to become)
obtenir (to get or obtain), **mentir** (to lie), **souffrir** (to suffer), **offrir** (to offer/give a present)

Imparfait Irregular Verbs

For **irregular** verbs: find the stem of the imperfect with the **present** form of **nous**, drop the **ons** and add the imperfect endings listed on Page 1 of this fact sheet:

For example:

Prendre - to take : nous **prenons** (présent) drop the ons and add ions = nous **prenions** (we use to take/we were taking .

Imparfait : je **prenais**, tu **prenais**, il **prenait**, nous **prenions**, vous **preniez**, ils/elles **prenaient**.

Voir - to see : nous **voyons** (présent), drop the ons and add ions = nous **voyions** (we used to see/we were seeing .

Imparfait : je **voyais**, tu **voyais**, il **voyait**, nous **voyions**, vous **voyiez**, ils/elles **voyaient**

Common irregular verbs to form the **imparfait** in French:

Irregular Verb		Stem
apprendre	to learn	appren
boire	to drink	buv
aller	to go	all
lire	to read	lis
venir	to come	ven
attendre	to wait	attend
avoir	to have	av
faire	to do/make	fais
vouloir	to want	voul
pouvoir	to be able to	pouv

Note that **pouvoir** in the **imparfait** can be translated as "**could**" in English.

For example : il pouvait nager - he could swim.

Exception:

être - to be : nous sommes (**présent**) - nous étions (**imparfait**)

Note: The verb *être* uses the stem **ét-** in the *imparfait* because it is the only French verb that does not follow the standard rule of forming the stem from the present tense *nous* form (in the case of *être* it is *sommes*, which does not contain **ons**)