



Imperfetto or passato prossimo?

Before delving into the difference between *imperfetto* and *passato prossimo* and trying to understand when to use which one, **let's first focus on these two tenses separately**, so that we have a better introduction to the topic.

When to use *passato prossimo*

Passato prossimo is a tense used to:

1) express past finished events and actions that still have some relevance in the present

Dove sei stato ieri? (Where have you been yesterday?)

Che cosa hai mangiato oggi a pranzo? (What have you eaten for lunch today?)

Sono stato a Parigi molte volte, ma ho sempre voglia di tornarci (I have been to Paris many times but I always want to go back)

2) describe an action that has started and ended in the past (something happening only once)

La scorsa settimana ho visto un film bellissimo (I have seen a wonderful movie last week)

Ieri sono andato a Milano per lavoro (I went to Milan for work yesterday)

Mi sono sposata lo scorso luglio (I got married last July)

3) tell a series of actions that happened in the past

Ho visto Marina, l'ho salutata e le ho chiesto come sta (I have seen Marina, I have greeted her and I have asked her how she is)

Ho incontrato Giovanni e siamo andati a mangiare insieme (I have met Giovanni and we ate together)

Mia sorella ha preso la macchina ed è andata a lavorare (My sister took the car and went to work)

When to use *imperfetto*

Imperfetto is a tense used to:

1) describe a situation, an event, a place that took place in the past

Ieri era una bellissima giornata, c'era un sole meraviglioso e faceva caldo (Yesterday was a beautiful day, the sun was lovely and it was warm)

La casa era gialla e aveva un bellissimo giardino (The house was yellow and had a lovely garden)

Il teatro era pieno di gente e molte persone erano in piedi perché non c'erano posti sufficienti (The theatre was full of people, many of them were standing because there weren't enough seats)

2) describe a person, a feeling, a status

Quando era giovane, mia mamma era bellissima (My mom was gorgeous when she was young)

Giovanna era molto triste e si sentiva sola (Giovanna was really sad and she was feeling lonely)

Il bambino era felice perché era insieme a tutti i suoi amichetti (The kid was happy because he was with all his little friends)

3) describe a habit or a repeated action in the past

D'estate andavo sempre al mare (I would always go to the beach in the summer)

Quando ero giovane, leggevo molti libri (I used to read a lot of books when I was young)

Quando andavo a scuola, tornavo sempre a casa a piedi (When I was in school, I would always walk back home)

4) describe two ongoing actions, two actions happening at the same time

Mentre leggevo, mio marito guardava la TV (While I was reading, my husband watched tv)

Mentre tornavo a casa, studiavo per l'esame di storia (While I was returning home, I studied for my history exam)

I ragazzi chiacchieravano mentre il professore faceva lezione (The kids were chatting while the professor was teaching his lesson)

When to use imperfetto and passato prossimo in the same sentence

The two tenses can be used together when:

1) there is a cause/effect relationship, where the *imperfetto* is used to express the cause, while the *passato prossimo* is used for the effect

Non sono venuto perché stavo male (I didn't come because I was feeling ill)

C'era molta gente al ristorante, così abbiamo aspettato (There were a lot of people at the restaurant, so we had to wait)

Ieri pioveva, quindi sono rimasto a casa (It was raining yesterday, so I stayed home)

2) when something happens while something else is ongoing

Mentre stavo tornando a casa, ho incontrato Maria (I met Maria while I was coming home)

Marco è arrivato mentre stavamo facendo colazione (Marco arrived while we were having breakfast)

Mentre leggevo, è andata via la corrente (While I was reading, the power went off)

How to choose imperfetto or passato prossimo

Both tenses are used to speak about the past but **from two different perspectives**. *Passato prossimo* is used to talk about finished events and when the focus is on the actual fact, *imperfetto* is used to talk about unfinished events and when the focus is on the action itself.

Let's compare:

We use the *imperfetto* to **describe habits** but we use the *passato prossimo* to tell about **finished actions** that took place in a defined time:

Quando ero giovane, andavo sempre a correre al parco (When I was young, I would always run in the park)

La scorsa settimana sono andato a correre tutti i giorni (Last week, I ran every day)

We use the *imperfetto* for **repeated actions in the past** but we use the *passato prossimo* to state **the number of times** the action has been repeated:

Marco giocava sempre a carte alla domenica (Marco would always play cards on Sundays)

Marco ha giocato a carte per tre domeniche di fila (Marco has played cards for three Sundays in a row)

We use the *imperfetto* to describe **multiple ongoing actions in the past** (happening at the same time), while we use the *passato prossimo* to talk about **a sequence of actions**:

Mentre parlava al telefono, Michela faceva esercizio e ascoltava la musica (While she was on the phone, Michela was exercising and listening to music)

Ieri Michela ha parlato al telefono, poi ha fatto esercizio e ha ascoltato la musica (Yesterday Michela spoke on the phone, then exercised and then listened to music)

We use the *imperfetto* to **describe something in the past**, while we use *passato prossimo* to **tell a story**:

Ieri faceva molto caldo e c'era tantissima gente alla spiaggia (It was very hot yesterday and there were many people at the beach)

Ieri ha fatto molto caldo e tante persone sono andate alla spiaggia (It was very hot yesterday and many people went to the beach)

We use the *imperfetto* to describe **a state or condition in the past**, without a specific time, while we use the *passato prossimo* to describe **a state or condition in a specific time frame**:

Marcella aveva i capelli lunghi quando era giovane (Marcella had long hair when she was young)

Marcella ha avuto i capelli lunghi per vent'anni, poi li ha tagliati (Marcella has had long hair for twenty years, then she cut them)

In città faceva molto caldo (It was really hot in the city)

In città ha fatto caldo in agosto (It was hot in the city in August)

