

12. Imperfect

1 Formation of the imperfect

Take the *nous* form of the present tense, remove *-ons* and add the endings *-ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient*.

nous **aimons** ⇒ j'**aimais**, nous **aimions**
nous **finissons** ⇒ je **finissais**, nous **finissions**
nous **vendons** ⇒ je **vendais**, nous **vendions**

The only exception to this rule is *être* which has a completely different stem *j'étais, tu étais* etc.

nous **sommes** ⇒ j'**étais**, nous **étions**

2 Use of the imperfect

Just as perfect tenses in French are used to express completed actions, the **imperfect** tense is used to express an action or state viewed as not completed. The imperfect is used as follows:

2.1 Mainly with *être*, for describing a state of affairs in the past:

Lorsqu'il **était** célibataire il **était** très dépensier

When he was single he was very extravagant

Il **faisait** noir et les routes **étaient** dangereuses

It was dark and the roads were dangerous

2.2 For describing an on-going activity in the past. Here English would often use *was / were doing*:

A cette époque-là, Paul **travaillait** à Paris

At that time Paul was working in Paris

2.3 For describing a habitual action in the past. Here the equivalent verb in English is *or can be* introduced by *used to* or *would*. **Be careful not to use the conditional here:**

Quand j'habitais à Paris, j'**allais** souvent au théâtre

When I lived in Paris, I would often go to the theatre

2.4 In conditional sentences using *si*:

Si j'**avais** plus de temps, j'**irais** à la soirée

If I had more time, I would go to the party

Il s'adresse aux gens comme s'ils **étaient** des enfants

He talks to people as if they were children

2.5 The imperfect can also be used to create a sense of politeness:

Je **voulais** vous dire que je ne serais pas au bureau lundi

I wanted to tell you that I won't be in the office on Monday