

Telling family stories in the past tenses

AP French Language and Culture · Lesson

Quick answer: To narrate a family story in French, use the imparfait for background, habits and descriptions, the passé composé for completed events that move the story forward, and the plus-que-parfait for an action that happened before another past action. Accurate auxiliaries and agreement make AP writing sound natural.

Level: AP French Language and Culture · **Standards:** AP French Language and Culture (College Board CED), Theme: Families and Communities

Which past tense tells a family story?

Three tenses, three jobs

The imparfait sets the scene and describes habits. The passé composé reports events that happened and are finished. The plus-que-parfait goes back before the main events. Together they let a narrator tell what the family was like, what happened, and what had already happened.



The imparfait is the background; the passé composé events sit on it.

How are the three tenses formed?

Tense	Formation	Example
passé composé	avoir / être (present) + past participle	Nous avons déménagé à Nantes. — We moved to Nantes.
imparfait	nous stem + -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient	Il pleuvait et nous habitions près de la gare. — It was raining and we lived near the station.

Tense	Formation	Example
plus-que-parfait	avoir / être (imparfait) + past participle	Quand Idrissa a reçu la lettre, sa mère avait déjà quitté Bamako. — When Idrissa got the letter, his mother had already left Bamako.

Agreement rules

With être and with pronominal verbs, the participle agrees with the subject: Elles **sont parties** tôt. With avoir, it agrees with a direct object placed before the verb: Les photos que mamie a **prises**.

When do I choose the imparfait or the passé composé?

Strong AP answers mix tenses inside one paragraph, the way a real storyteller does. A single sentence can even hold all three: the scene, the event and the earlier cause. Listen for signal words such as toujours, souvent and chaque (habit), against soudain, hier and un jour (event).

IMPARFAIT le décor, la météo l'habitude (chaque été) la description, les sentiments	PASSÉ COMPOSÉ l'événement terminé l'action qui change tout hier, soudain, un jour
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A quick decision chart for narration.

Chaque été, nous **allions** chez ma tante à Annecy. Un jour, elle nous **a offert** un chiot. — Every summer we went to my aunt's in Annecy. One day she gave us a puppy. The habit uses the imparfait; the single surprise uses the passé composé.

Watch out: one English past, two French pasts

English says *we visited* for both a habit and a single visit. French must choose: nous visitons (every Sunday) versus nous avons visité (once). Ask whether the action repeats or happened one time.

Culture note

In novels and history books, French authors often use the passé simple (il naquit, elle partit). Spoken French and informal writing use the passé composé instead. For AP, recognize the passé simple when reading; use the passé composé when writing.

Zoé's tip

Picture a film: the imparfait is the camera slowly showing the room, the passé composé is the cut to each action, and the plus-que-parfait is the flashback. Decide the shot, then pick the tense!

Key points to remember

- The passé composé = avoir or être in the present + past participle.
- The imparfait = nous stem without -ons + -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient.
- The plus-que-parfait = avoir or être in the imparfait + past participle.
- Être verbs, pronominal verbs and preceding direct objects trigger agreement.
- The passé simple appears in literary texts and must be recognized in AP reading.

Telling Family Stories in the Past Tenses: frequently asked questions

When do I use the imparfait instead of the passé composé?

Use the imparfait for background, descriptions, feelings and repeated habits in the past. Use the passé composé for a specific event that happened and finished.

How is the plus-que-parfait formed?

Put avoir or être in the imparfait, then add the past participle: j'avais fini, elle était partie. It shows an action before another past action.

Which verbs use être in the passé composé?

Verbs of movement and state change such as aller, venir, arriver, partir, naître, mourir, plus all pronominal verbs. They agree with the subject.

When does a past participle agree with avoir?

It agrees in gender and number with a direct object placed before the verb, such as que, la, les: les photos que j'ai prises.

Why should AP students recognize the passé simple?

Literary passages in the interpretive section use it. Students need to read il naquit as a past event, although they do not need to write it.