

Narrating an anecdote with three past tenses

French B1 (intermediate) · Lesson

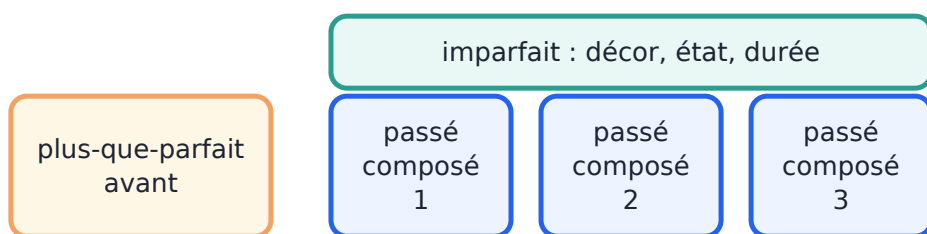
Quick answer: To tell a story in French, use the *passé composé* for the events that move the plot, the *imparfait* for the setting, feelings and actions in progress, and the *plus-que-parfait* for anything that had already happened. Connectors such as *d'abord*, *ensuite*, *soudain* and *finalement* guide the listener from one event to the next.

Level: French B1 (CEFR intermediate) · **Standards:** CEFR B1, Spoken production

Which tense tells which part of a story?

A French anecdote uses three past tenses together. Each one has its own job, and mixing them up is the fastest way to confuse a listener.

Tense	Job	Signal
passé composé	events that move the story forward	one after another
imparfait	setting, feelings, weather, habits, actions in progress	what things were like
plus-que-parfait	something that had already happened	earlier than the main event



le fil du récit : une action après l'autre

Three tenses, three jobs on one timeline.

Examples

Il **pleuvait** quand Awa **est arrivée** à la gare. — It was raining when Awa arrived at the station.

Elle **avait oublié** son billet, alors elle **a couru** jusqu'au guichet. — She had forgotten her ticket, so she ran to the ticket window.

How do you form the plus-que-parfait?

Rule

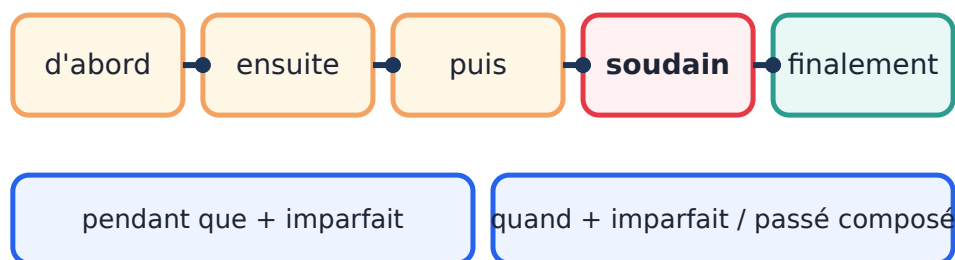
Take the *imparfait* of *avoir* or *être* and add the past participle: j'avais fini, nous étions partis. The auxiliary is the same as in the *passé composé*, and agreement works the same way: elle était partie, elles s'étaient perdues.

Notice that the plus-que-parfait never moves the plot: it looks backward to explain why something happens, as in *Il était en colère parce qu'on avait annulé son train* — He was angry because his train had been canceled.

Which connectors keep the story moving?

Connector	Meaning
d'abord, au début	first, at the beginning
ensuite, puis, après	then, next, afterward
soudain, tout à coup	suddenly (with the <i>passé composé</i>)
pendant que, alors que	while (with the <i>imparfait</i>)
finaleme nt, à la fin, enfin	finally, in the end

Use one connector per event and do not stack them. A good anecdote has a beginning (d'abord), a twist (soudain) and an ending (finaleme nt), and it usually lasts only six to eight sentences.



Connectors that move a story forward (top) and link two actions (bottom).

Watch out

English uses one simple past for everything: "I walked" can mean one walk or a daily habit. French must choose. *Je marchais* describes a background or a habit; *j'ai marché* counts a completed action. "While I was walking, a dog appeared" becomes *Pendant que je marchais, un chien est apparu*.

Culture

In everyday speech, French people tell stories with the passé composé and the imparfait only. The passé simple (il ouvrit la porte) belongs to novels and formal writing; recognize it, but do not use it in conversation.

Zoé's tip

Before telling an anecdote, set the scene in two imparfait sentences (Il faisait nuit. J'étais seule.), then switch to the passé composé at the first soudain. Listeners follow you instantly.

Key points to remember

- The passé composé answers "what happened next?"; the imparfait answers "what was it like?".
- The plus-que-parfait is the imparfait of avoir or être plus a past participle.
- Soudain and tout à coup announce a sudden event in the passé composé.
- Pendant que links two simultaneous actions, normally in the imparfait.
- In conversation the passé simple is not used; it appears in novels.

Narrating an Anecdote with Three Past Tenses: frequently asked questions

When do I use the imparfait instead of the passé composé in a story?

Use the imparfait for the background: weather, feelings, descriptions, habits and actions in progress. Use the passé composé for completed events that advance the story.

What is the plus-que-parfait used for?

It places an action before the main past event, like English "had" plus a participle: elle avait oublié son billet. It often explains a cause or a surprise.

Which connectors should I use to tell an anecdote?

Start with d'abord or au début, continue with ensuite and puis, add soudain for a twist, and finish with finalement or à la fin.

Is the passé simple needed to tell a story in French?

No. The passé simple is a written, literary tense. In speaking and in everyday writing, the passé composé and the imparfait are enough.

How do I make a story sound natural when I speak?

Set the scene first in the imparfait, keep events short in the passé composé, and use one

connector per event. Pauses and short sentences work better than long ones.