

Remembering the past with the imparfait

French 2 (high school) · Lesson

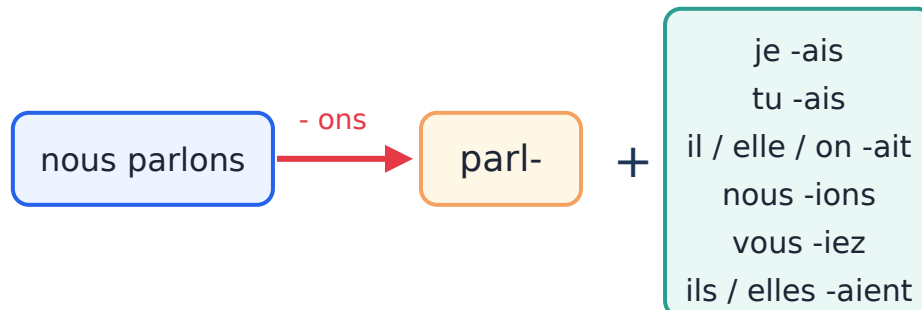
Quick answer: The imparfait is the French past tense for habits, descriptions and background scenes. To form it, take the nous form of the present tense, remove -ons, and add -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient. Only être is irregular, with the stem ét-. It often translates English “used to”, “was doing” and repeated “would”.

Level: French 2 (high school, ACTFL Novice High) · **Standards:** ACTFL Novice High, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational

How do you form the imparfait?

Rule: stem + ending

Start with the nous form of the present tense, drop -ons, then add one of six endings: -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient. The endings are the same for every verb, even irregular ones.



One stem, six endings: the recipe works for almost every French verb.

Subject	parler (parl-)	finir (finiss-)	prendre (pren-)	faire (fais-)
je	parlais	finissais	prenais	faisais
tu	parlais	finissais	prenais	faisais
il, elle, on	parlait	finissait	prenait	faisait
nous	parlions	finissions	prenions	faisions
vous	parliez	finissiez	preniez	faisiez
ils, elles	paraient	finissaient	prenaient	faisaient

What is the one irregular verb?

Only être has an irregular stem, ét-, with the regular endings: j'étais, tu étais, il était, nous étions, vous étiez, ils étaient.

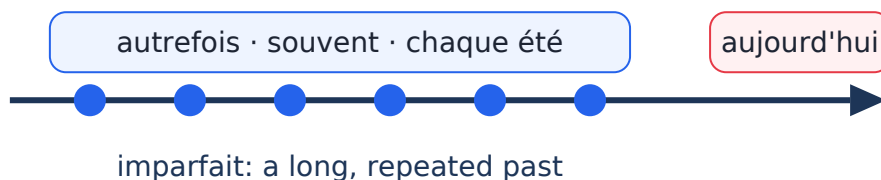
Spelling changes

- manger keeps its e before a: je mangeais, but nous mangions.
- commencer takes a cedilla before a: je commençais, but nous commencions.
- étudier doubles the i: nous étudions, vous étudiez.

When do you use the imparfait?

Think of the background of a movie: the scenery, the routine, the mood. Single events come later, with another tense.

- **Habits:** Chaque été, nous allions à Annecy. — Every summer, we went to Annecy.
- **Description:** Ma grand-mère avait les cheveux gris. — My grandmother had gray hair.
- **Background:** Il pleuvait et il était huit heures. — It was raining and it was eight o'clock.
- **Feelings and age:** À sept ans, j'adorais le chocolat chaud. — At seven, I loved hot chocolate.



The imparfait stretches over time: no clear start, no clear end.

Watch out

English has three ways to say one idea: *I used to play*, *I was playing*, and *I would play every day*. French often needs only *Je jouais*. When *would* means a past habit, never use *je jouerais*.

Culture note

French fairy tales open with *Il était une fois...* — Once upon a time... The imparfait paints the scene before anything happens.

Zoé's tip

Listen for signal words such as *autrefois*, *souvent*, *toujours*, *d'habitude*, *tous les samedis* and

quand j'étais petite. They announce a routine or a background picture.

Key points to remember

- Stem: the nous form of the present minus -ons (nous parlons gives parl-).
- Endings: -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient for every verb.
- Être is the only irregular stem: ét- (j'étais, nous étions).
- Uses: habits, descriptions, weather, time, age, feelings and childhood memories.
- Signal words: autrefois, souvent, toujours, chaque été, quand j'étais petit.

Remembering the Past with the Imparfait: frequently asked questions

How do you form the imparfait in French?

Take the nous form of the present tense, remove -ons, and add -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient. For example, nous finissons gives finiss-, so je finissais.

Which verb has an irregular imparfait stem?

Only être. Its stem is ét-, so you say j'étais, tu étais, il était, nous étions, vous étiez, ils étaient. Every other verb follows the nous rule, even faire (fais-) and avoir (av-).

Does the imparfait mean “used to”?

Yes, often. Je jouais can mean I used to play, I was playing, or I would play (as a habit). The context and the signal words tell you which English version fits best.

Why do some verbs have two i's in the imparfait?

Verbs whose nous stem ends in -i, like étudier, keep that i before the ending -ions or -iez. That is why you write nous étudions and vous étudiez, with a double i.

When should I choose the imparfait instead of another past tense?

Choose it for habits, descriptions, weather, time, age and feelings in the past. It sets the scene. A one-time event that interrupts the scene needs a different tense.