

Telling a story: event or background?

French 2 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: Use the passé composé for events that happened and ended: they move a story forward. Use the imparfait for the background: weather, descriptions, feelings, habits and actions in progress. A long action in the imparfait is often interrupted by a short event in the passé composé: "Il dormait quand le téléphone a sonné."

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 choose between the passé composé and the imparfait?

Rule: plot or backdrop?

The passé composé answers the question *What happened?* It names events with a beginning and an end. The imparfait answers *What was it like?* It paints the backdrop: the weather, the people, the mood, the routine. A handy test: a photograph can show the imparfait, but only a film can show the passé composé.

Malik a vu un bonhomme de neige



imparfait: durée passé composé: moment

The imparfait is a long bar; the passé composé is a single flash on top of it.

Passé composé: events	Imparfait: background
hier, ce matin, un jour	toujours, souvent, d'habitude
soudain, tout à coup	chaque jour, tous les soirs
d'abord, ensuite, puis, enfin	pendant que, à cette époque
pendant trois heures (finished)	il était huit heures, il faisait beau

How do the two tenses work together in one sentence?

A long action in progress takes the imparfait. A short event that cuts into it takes the passé composé.

Examples

- Nadia **attendait** le bus quand il **a commencé** à neiger. — Nadia was waiting for the bus when it started to snow.
- Pendant que nous **dînions**, le téléphone **a sonné**. — While we were having dinner, the phone rang.
- Mon frère **dormait** pendant que je **lisais**. — My brother was sleeping while I was reading.

How do you build a story with both tenses?

Most stories use three layers: the setting (imparfait), the events (passé composé), and the reaction (imparfait again).

1. Décor: imparfait

C'était un samedi. Il neigeait.

2. Événements: passé composé

Soudain, il a vu... Il a pris...

3. Réaction: imparfait

Il était content. Tout le monde riait.

A three-layer plan for any short story.

C'**était** un samedi de février à Québec. Il **neigeait** et tout le monde **portait** un bonnet. Soudain, Malik **a vu** un énorme bonhomme de neige. Il **a pris** une photo, puis il **a couru** vers ses amis. — It was a Saturday in February in Québec City. It was snowing and everybody was wearing a hat. Suddenly, Malik saw a huge snowman. He took a picture, then ran to his friends.

Watch out

English *went* hides the difference. *Every day I went to school* is a habit: J'allais à l'école. *Yesterday I went to school* is one event: Je suis allé à l'école. Always ask yourself: once, or again and again?

Culture note

Every winter, Québec City holds its Winter Carnival. Its mascot is Bonhomme Carnaval, a snowman in a red hat and a ceinture fléchée, the traditional woven sash.

Zoé's tip

Before you write a verb, ask: *Then what happened?* If the answer is yes, use the passé composé. If the verb only sets the scene, use the imparfait.

Key points to remember

- Passé composé = completed events, the plot (Then what happened?).
- Imparfait = background, descriptions, habits, actions in progress.
- Signal words: soudain, hier, un jour (passé composé); souvent, toujours, pendant que (imparfait).
- Interruption pattern: imparfait + quand + passé composé.
- Most stories alternate: setting, events, reaction.

Telling a Story: Event or Background?: frequently asked questions

What is the difference between the passé composé and the imparfait?

The passé composé tells completed events that move the story forward. The imparfait describes the background: weather, feelings, habits and actions in progress. Together they give a story its action and its scenery.

Which signal words go with the passé composé?

Words that point to a precise moment or a sequence: hier, ce matin, un jour, soudain, tout à coup, d'abord, ensuite, puis, enfin. They announce that something happened and finished.

Which signal words go with the imparfait?

Words that point to repetition or duration: toujours, souvent, d'habitude, chaque jour, tous les soirs, pendant que, à cette époque. They announce a routine or a situation in progress.

Can I use both tenses in the same sentence?

Yes. The imparfait gives the action in progress and the passé composé gives the interruption: Elle lisait quand son amie a téléphoné. Two simultaneous actions both take the imparfait.

Why does "Il faisait beau" use the imparfait?

Weather is background information. It describes the scene and does not move the story forward, so the imparfait is the natural choice, unless the weather is the surprising event itself.