



Passé Composé and Imparfait: French Past Tenses Explained

KS4 FRENCH

LANGUAGES

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Why Does French Have Two Past Tenses?

English speakers sometimes find it strange that **French** has two main ways to talk about the past: **passé composé** and **imparfait**. In English, we usually just use the past simple ("I walked") or past continuous ("I was walking"). But French speakers need to choose between these two tenses depending on what they want to say.

The key difference is about **completion** and **duration**. Think of it like describing a movie scene: one tense tells you what happened, and the other sets the scene.

Passé Composé: Completed Actions

The **passé composé** talks about actions that happened and finished. These are **specific events** with a clear beginning and end. You use it for things that you did once, or a number of times in a definite way.

For example: "*J'ai mangé une pomme*" (I ate an apple). The action is complete—you finished eating the apple.

Think of it like ticking off a task on your to-do list. You completed it. It's done.

Imparfait: Background and Habits

The **imparfait** is different. It describes things that were **ongoing, repeated**, or set the **scene** in the past. It's about actions without a clear ending point, or things that used to happen regularly.

For example: "*Je mangeais une pomme chaque jour*" (I used to eat an apple every day). This wasn't a single event—it was a habit.

Think of it like the background music or lighting in a film. It creates the atmosphere while other things happen.

Putting Them Together

Real French stories use both tenses together. The **imparfait** sets the scene ("The weather was beautiful. I was walking in the park."), and the **passé composé** tells you what happened next ("Suddenly, I saw a dog!").

Here's an example: "*Il faisait beau. Je marchais dans le parc. Soudain, j'ai vu un chien!*" (It was beautiful. I was walking in the park. Suddenly, I saw a dog!)

Learning when to use each tense helps you tell French stories properly, just like native speakers do!