



# Talking About the Past in French: Past Tenses Explained

KS4 FRENCH

LANGUAGES

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## Why Do We Need Past Tenses?

When you speak **French**, you need different ways to talk about things that happened at different times. Just like in **English**, you don't say "I go to the park yesterday" – you say "I went to the park yesterday." **French** works the same way, but it has special rules that make it interesting.

## The Passé Composé: The Main Past Tense

The most common way to talk about the past in **French** is the **passé composé**. This literally means "compound past" because it uses **two parts**: a helper verb (called an **auxiliary verb**) and the main verb.

For example, "I ate" in **French** is "J'ai mangé" – literally "I have eaten." The helper verb is "ai" (have), and the main part is "mangé" (eaten).

Think of it like building a sandwich. The helper verb is the bread, and the past part of the main verb is the filling inside. You need both pieces to make it work.

Most verbs use **avoir** (to have) as their helper, but some use **être** (to be) instead. Movement verbs like "aller" (to go) and "arriver" (to arrive) use **être**.

## The Imparfait: Describing How Things Were

Sometimes you need to describe what things were like in the past, rather than what actually happened. This is where the **imparfait** comes in. It's sometimes called the **imperfect tense**.

Use the **imparfait** when you want to describe background situations, feelings, or habits from the past. For example, "I was playing football" or "It was raining."

Think of it like the difference between taking a photo (the **passé composé** – one moment frozen in time) and filming a video (the **imparfait** – capturing something ongoing and changeable).

## Putting It Together

Often, you use both tenses together in a story. The **imparfait** sets the scene - what was happening and what things were like - while the **passé composé** describes the specific events that interrupted or happened during that time.

For example: "Il pleuvait dehors et je regardais la télévision quand mon ami a téléphoné." (It was raining outside and I was watching television when my friend called.) "Plevait" and "regardais" are **imparfait** (the background), while "a téléphoné" is **passé composé** (the event that happened).

Learning these **two main past tenses** is the key to telling stories and talking about your experiences in **French!**