Chapter 18: What is the past tense?

The past tense is used to express an action that occurred in the past.

In English

There are several verb forms that indicate the action took place in the past:

I worked	simple past
I have worked	present perfect
I was working	past progressive
I used to work	with helping verb *used to*
I did work	past emphatic

The simple past is called 'simple' b/c it is a simple tense; that is, it consists of one word (worked in the example above). The other past tenses are compound tenses; that is, they consist of more than one word, an auxiliary plus a main verb (was working; did work)

In French

There are two French tenses which correspond to all the English past verbal forms listed above: **Le Passé Composé** and **L'Imparfait**. We'll refer to these two tenses by their French names because their usage does not correspond to a specific English tense.

-------------------------------- **Le Passé Composé** (Present Perfect) ----------------------------------

☒ --- The **passé composé** is formed with the auxiliary verb **avoir** or **être** conjugated in the present tense + the past participle of the main verb. As in English, the past participle does not change form from one person to another.

J'ai parlé	I spoke, I have spoken	Nous avons parlé	we spoke, we have spoken
Je suis allé	I went, I have gone	Il est allé	He went, he has gone

☒ --- Selection of the auxiliary AVOIR or ÊTRE

Most verbs use the auxiliary **avoir**. Therefore, it is easier for you to memorize the list of verbs conjugated with **être** and assume that all the other verbs are conjugated with **avoir**.

There are approximately sixteen common verbs that are conjugated with **être.** You will find common "etre verbs" easy to memorize in pair of opposites:

Aller	*to go*	≠	venir	*to come*
Retourner	*to return*	≠	rester	*to remain*
Entrer	*to come in*	≠	sortir	*to go out*
Arriver	*to arrive*	≠	partir	*to leave*
Monter	*to climb*	≠	descendre	*to go down*
		≠	tomber	*to fall*
Naître	*to be born*	≠	mourir	*to die*

☒ --- Agreement of the past participle

The rules of agreement of the past participle depend on whether the auxiliary verb is **avoir** or **être.**

Être – When the auxiliary is **être**, the past participle agrees with the subject:

John <u>est allé</u> au cinéma. Marie y <u>est allée</u> aussi. Ils <u>sont allés</u> au cinéma. Elles <u>sont allées</u> au cinéma.

Avoir – When the auxiliary is **avoir**, the past participle agrees with the direct object, if the direct object comes before the verb in the sentence. If there is no direct object or if the direct object comes after the verb, there is no agreement and the past pasticiple remains in its masculine singular form. Here are a few sentences where the past participle agrees wiwth the direct object because the direct object precedes it.

<u>La chaise</u> qu'il a achet<u>ée</u> est confortable. <u>Les chaises</u> qu'il a achet<u>ées</u> sont confortables.

Est-ce qu'il a acheté la chaise rouge? Non, il ne l'a pas achet<u>ée.</u>

Remember the following when using the **passé composé**:
1. Determine whether the verb takes **avoir** or **être** as the auxiliary.
2. Depending on which auxiliary verb is required, apply the appropriate rules of agreement.

-------------------------------- L'Imparfait (Imperfect) -----------------------------------

☒ --- The **imparfait** is a simple tense formed by adding a set of endings to the stem of the verb. You will find those endings in your textbook.

Two English verb forms indicate that the **imparfait** should be used in French:

1. The verb form includes, or could include, *used to* → tells how things used to be

I used to go to France every year : J'allais en France chaque année.
As a child, I went to France every year : Enfant, j'allais en France chaque année.

2. The verb form is in the past progressive tense → tells what was going on

At 10:00PM last night I was sleeping : À dix heures hier soir, je dormais.

Except for those two English verb forms, the English verb does not indicate whether you should use the **imparfait** or the **passé composé.**

-------------------------------- **Selection:** Le Passé Composé **OR** L'Imparfait ----------------------------------

Whether to put a verb in the **passé composé** or the **imparfait** often depends on the context. As a general guideline, the difference in the two tenses is as follow:

Le passé composé → tells 'what happened'
L'imparfait → tells 'how things used to be ' or 'what was going on'

Here is an example. The same form of the verb to go, namely 'went', is used in the two answers below: 'I went to school'. However, the tense of the French verb aller (*to go*) changes depending of the question asked.

- 'What happened?'
Question: What did you do yesterday?
Answer: I went to school.
The question and answer tell 'what happened yesterday;' therefore, 'did do' and 'went' are in the **passé composé.**

- 'How things used to be'
Question: What did you do when you were a child?
Answer: I went to school.
The question and answer tell 'How things used to be;' therefore, 'did do' and 'went' are in the **imparfait**.

As you can see from the two French examples above, the tense of the answer is usually the same as the tense of the question.

- 'What was going on?'
Since the **imparfait** and the **passé composé** indicate actions that took place during the same time period in the past, the two tenses are often intermingled in a sentence or a story.

I was reading when he arrived : Je lisais quand il est arrivé.

Sometimes both tenses are possible, but usually one of the two is more logical. Consult your textbook.

-------------------------------- **Review** ----------------------------------

Circle the verbs that would be put in the imparfait and underline the verbs that would be put in the passé composé.

Last summer, I *went* to France with my family. Everyone *was* very excited when we *arrived* at the airport.

While my mother *checked* the luggage and my father *handled* the tickets, my little sister Mary *ran* away. My parents

dropped everything and *tried* to catch her, but she *ducked* behind the counter. Finally, a manager *grabbed* her and

brought her back to us. She *was crying* because she *was* sad she *was leaving* her dog for two weeks. Everyone

comforted her and she *went* on the plane and *left* with a smile.

From *English Grammar for Students of French* by Jacqueline Morton; The Olivia & Hill Press, 1997.