Imparfait or passé composé?

La caravane est arrivée : les hommes étaient en tête et les femmes fermaient la marche. The caravan arrived: at the front were the men, the women followed behind.

LESSON

What is it?

Both past tenses are commonly used and do not have the same equivalent in English. It is therefore crucial to grasp the nuances of meaning and perspectives when using them.

What is it like in English?

In English, the preterit and the present perfect are commonly used to express actions happening in the past and both can be translated by the *passé composé* in French:

I have read your letter. / I read your letter. → J'ai lu votre lettre.

Depending on the context, "I read your letter" could also be translated by Je lisais votre lettre.

The above examples show that the preterit and the present perfect do not match the *passé composé* and *imparfait* and you will need to know the context as well as the intention of the speaker to decide which past tense to use in French.

What is it like in French?

1. Complete or incomplete information/situation?

The *passé composé* is used for completed actions in the past. With the *imparfait*, we don't know when the action has begun or will end.

Ce week-end, il a fait chaud. → Last weekend, it was hot.

Ce week-end, il faisait chaud. → Last weekend, it was hot.

As you can see, the translation is the same in English but the speaker gives a different interpretation to his/ her words when using one or the other. This means that the speaker has the choice to bring out a different nuance to the intended meaning:

- In the above examples, when using the *passé composé*, the speaker indicates that he/she is looking back to the weekend and concludes or makes a general comment over the weather on that particular weekend. It's definite and complete. One could say that when declaring that it was hot at the weekend, it is not hot anymore at the time of speaking.
- When using the *imparfait*, the speaker describes a fact or a situation, and the listener is expecting the speaker to carry on such as:

Ce week-end, il faisait chaud et du coup, je suis allé à la mer.

→ Last weekend, it was hot and as a result, I went to the seaside.

The speaker does not insist on the beginning or end of this fact, it is of no importance. It may still be quite hot when he/she speaks. We don't know if this event is completed or not.

2. Descriptive background or main event?

The *imparfait* and *passé composé* can be compared to the different elements in a theatre play: the *imparfait* would be like the scenery or backdrop and the actors' performance, the events happening on the stage would be the *passé composé*. In a narrative, as in a play, the most important elements consist of what

is happening in the foreground. You would then use the *passé composé*. The *imparfait* being used for secondary, background information or habitual events in the past.

Il pleuvait quand nous sommes rentrés. → It was raining when we got back home.

Je faisais la vaisselle quand mon portable a sonné. → I was doing the dishes when my mobile rang.

Note that a series of verbs in the *passé composé* indicates a chronology while this sense of order does not exist with the *imparfait*.

Après la réunion, il s'est levé, a pris ses clés et est sorti du bâtiment.

→ At the end of the meeting, he got up, grabbed its keys and left the building.

This string of events could not be described in the *imparfait* as it wouldn't make any sense.

3. Ongoing or change in situation?

Using *toujours*, *jamais* and *jusqu'à maintenant* with the *passé composé* indicates that the situation continues in the present. With the *imparfait*, it has ended.

Il a toujours habité dans la même maison (et il continue à y habiter).

→ He has always been living in the same house (and carries on living there).

Jusqu'à maintenant, il habitait dans la même maison, mais il a déménagé la semaine dernière.

→ Up to now, he was living in the same house, but he moved out last week.

4. Imparfait used in narratives:

Some narratives, especially in literature, will use the *imparfait*. By presenting it as if it were in progress, the writer highlights the importance of the event. In such cases, the *imparfait* is often preceded by a clear indication of time or date at the beginning of the sentence.

Le 31, à six heures du matin, nous partions pour Kinshasa.

→ On the 31st at 6 in the morning, we were leaving/left for Kinshasa.

In the same line and with historical events, the *imparfait* will be called *imparfait historique*:

En 1981, François Mitterrand devenait président.

→ In 1981, François Mitterrand became president.

Note that in both examples, it is perfectly correct to use the *passé composé* or the *passé simple* but in choosing the *imparfait*, you give another dimension and intent to your words.

→ Fiche 10 : Passé composé or passé simple?



11 Underline the correct tense in the following sentences.

- **a.** La fin du film était très triste, alors [je pleurais / j'ai pleuré].
- **b.** Quand il a brusquement ouvert la porte, tout le monde [sursautait / a sursauté].
- c. Quand le cours a commencé, l'amphi [était bondé / a été bondé].
- **d.** Il [a toujours été / était toujours] allergique au gluten.
- e. Elle a commencé à conduire quand elle [avait / a eu] une voiture.
- **f.** Je [n'essayais jamais / n'ai jamais essayé], mais pourquoi pas ?
- **g.** Le chien [aboyait / a aboyé] quand il nous a vus.

- **h.** Nous [ne comprenions pas / n'avons pas compris] pourquoi il est parti.
- i. Ils [faisaient / ont fait] leurs devoirs, ils peuvent jouer maintenant.
- j. Le 5 septembre 1944, l'armée française d'Afrique [a libéré / libérait] la ville.
- k. Comme il [faisait / a fait] beau, nous avons piqueniqué.
- I. Hier soir, [je regardais / j'ai regardé] Netflix quand tu as appelé.
- **m.** Hier soir, [je regardais / j'ai regardé] Netflix puis je me suis couchée.

Conjugate the verb in the conjugate the verb in the conjugate the verb in the conjugate the conju	e correct past tense.
a. [r	eiger] pendant tout le week-end. Même si le paysage[être]
très beau, nous	[ne pas pouvoir] faire grand-chose!
b. Je / J'	[jamais aller] en Australie même si
je / j'	[toujours vouloir] le faire.
c. Toute leur vie, mes parents	[travailler] et, maintenant, ils vont se reposer.
d. Avant, nous	[habiter] en Algérie, maintenant, nous sommes à Marseille.
e. Tous les matins, elles	[prendre] le bus et[descendre]
au même arrêt.	
f. Tout	[partir] [aller] bien jusqu'à maintenant, puis elle
et tout	[s'écrouler].
2 Transform the following	tout into the nact using the passé sampasé or the imparfait
_	text into the past, using the <i>passé composé</i> or the <i>imparfait</i> . ur la place à l'entrée de la ville. Je règle le chauffeur comme convenu
le portail de la vil visibles : façades léz maintenant inhabi Je sors de la vieille	terre et je redoute de voir ses effets. Je me décide enfin à franchir e et commence à arpenter les rues. Les dégâts sont encore bien cardées, murs écroulés. On peut voir l'intérieur de certaines maisons cées. La vie continue cependant et des enfants courent dans les rues. ville et aperçois Pachek qui vient à ma rencontre à grands pas.
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4 Free writing: Write a sho the <i>imparfait</i> .	ort paragraph on your arrival in a new place using the <i>passé composé</i> and