

The Imperfect Tense



The imperfect tense in German is another way of talking about things that happened in the past. It is also known as the ‘simple past’, because it is formed as one word, rather than two for the compound (perfect) past (e.g. *habe gemacht* etc.). The imperfect tends to be used more in writing than in speech, but it is still important to know the rules of its formation!

The imperfect tense is formed in different ways, depending on whether the verb in question is weak (regular) or strong (irregular).

Remember:

- **WEAK** verbs are verbs who just go along with the herd (regular!)
- **STRONG** verbs are strong enough to change and be different (irregular!)

For weak verbs (regular):

Take the ‘en’ off the infinitive, to form what we call the ‘stem’.

e.g. *spielen* goes to *spiel-*

Then add the following endings:

ich	spielte
du	spieltest
er/sie/es	spielte
wir	spielten
ihr	spieltet
sie/Sie	spielten

As you can see, the forms look similar to the present tense, with the addition of a ‘t’ or ‘te’. For certain verbs, where you would otherwise get a cluster of consonants, an extra ‘e’ is added:

arbeiten – *ich arbeitete* I worked

However these verbs take this ‘e’ in the third person singular of the present tense (*er arbeitet*) so should be easy to spot.

Here are a few examples of regular verbs:

kaufen – ich kaufte
hören – du hörtest
machen – er machte
spielen – wir spielten
wohnen – ihr wohntet
sagen – sie sagten

Now you try!

lachen – to laugh *tanzen* – to dance *segeln* – to sail

ich du er

lernen – to learn *packen* – to pack *ordnen* – to organise

wir ihr sie

Strong verbs (irregular):

Strong verbs in German form the imperfect by changing the vowel in the middle of the stem, and cannot be predicted by a universal set of rules. Certain groups of verbs follow the same pattern of vowel changes, but the basic rule is that these have to be learnt off by heart.

Here are some common examples:

<i>beginnen</i>	-	<i>begann</i>
<i>treffen</i>	-	<i>traf</i>
<i>kommen</i>	-	<i>kam</i>
<i>fahren</i>	-	<i>fuhr</i>
<i>sitzen</i>	-	<i>saß</i>
<i>lesen</i>	-	<i>las</i>
<i>finden</i>	-	<i>fand</i>
<i>singen</i>	-	<i>sang</i>
<i>schlafen</i>	-	<i>schlief</i>
<i>fliegen</i>	-	<i>flog</i>
<i>gehen</i>	-	<i>ging</i>

As you can see, the *-en* for the infinitive ending is removed, and there is a vowel change in the middle. Then the following endings are added:

ich	fuhr
du	fuh rst
er/sie/es	fuhr
wir	fuh ren
ihr	fuh rt
sie/Sie	fuh ren

Use the imperfect stems listed above to give the forms for the following verbs:

schlafen – to sleep

finden – to find

sitzen – to sit

ich

du

er

lesen – to read

singen – to sing

treffen – to meet

wir

ihr

sie

When learning irregular verbs, it is best to learn all the parts of the verb which are irregular together. You will remember from GCSE that strong verbs are irregular in the 2nd and 3rd per sing present and perfect tenses (past participle), too.

By far the best grammatical strategy overall is to learn four parts of the verb together – and indeed these seem to trip off the tongue, with many patterns you will recognise from English (e.g. swim, swam, swum). Learning the parts of irregular verbs in this way means you are prepared for every context where you might need to use (i.e. conjugate!) an irregular verb, and won't be caught out.

So – use the strong verb list to learn:

	infinitive	3rd pers sing present	imperfect	past participle
e.g.	beginnen	beginnt	begann	begonnen
	fahren	fährt	fuhr	gefahren

Modal verbs never have an umlaut in the imperfect tense:

müssen	können	dürfen
ich musste	ich konnte	ich durfte
du musstest	du konntest	du durftest
er/sie/es musste	er/sie/es konnte	er/sie/es durfte
wir mussten	wir konnten	wir durften
ihr musstet	ihr konntet	ihr durftet
sie/Sie mussten	sie/Sie konnten	sie/Sie durften
mögen	wollen	sollen
ich mochte	ich wollte	ich sollte
du mochtest	du wolltest	du solltest
er/sie/es mochte	er/sie/es wollte	er/sie/es sollte
wir mochten	wir wollten	wir sollten
ihr mochtet	ihr wolltet	ihr solltet
sie/Sie mochten	sie/Sie wollten	sie/Sie sollten