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. *machte* rather than *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	spiel**te**
du	spiel**test**
er/sie/es	spiel**te**
wir	spiel**ten**
ihr	spiel**tet**
sie/Sie	spiel**ten**

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 arbeit**ete*** 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 kauf**te**
hören – du hör**test**
machen – er mach**te**
spielen – wir spiel**ten**
wohnen – ihr wohn**tet**
sagen – sie sag**ten**

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:

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

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	fuhr**st**
er/sie/es	fuhr
wir	fuhr**en**
ihr	fuhr**t**
sie/Sie	fuhr**en**

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 muss**te**	ich konn**te**	ich durf**te**
du muss**test**	du konn**test**	du durf**test**
er/sie/es muss**te**	er/sie/es konn**te**	er/sie/es durf**te**
wir muss**ten**	wir konn**ten**	wir durf**ten**
ihr muss**tet**	ihr konn**tet**	ihr durf**tet**
sie/Sie muss**ten**	sie/Sie konn**ten**	sie/Sie durf**ten**
mögen	**wollen**	**sollen**
ich moch**te**	ich woll**te**	ich soll**te**
du moch**test**	du woll**test**	du soll**test**
er/sie/es moch**te**	er/sie/es woll**te**	er/sie/es soll**te**
wir moch**ten**	wir woll**ten**	wir soll**ten**
ihr moch**tet**	ihr woll**tet**	ihr soll**tet**
sie/Sie moch**ten**	sie/Sie woll**ten**	sie/Sie soll**ten**