

# Chapter 17 Grammar Lesson

## The imperfect tense

Until now, all your Latin verbs have been present tense verbs. Present tense verbs describe action that's happening now—in the present. In this chapter, you will learn a new tense, to make your sentences more interesting. Your new verb tense is called the *imperfect tense*.

Why would a verb tense be called *imperfect*? Is there something wrong with it? No, not exactly! It *is* true that *imperfect* means *not perfect*. But when we are talking about verbs, *perfect* means *complete*. The *imperfect tense* describes action that is *not complete*. The action is not complete because it is ongoing.

There's one more thing you need to know about the imperfect tense. You've learned that it describes ongoing action. But *when* does this ongoing action happen? After all, don't tenses tell us *when* something happens? Yes, they do. The ongoing action of an imperfect tense verb happens *in the past*. An imperfect tense verb describes action that is *past and ongoing*.

## Translating the imperfect tense

The basic translation of the imperfect tense is *was or were . . . -ing*. For example, *he was thinking* or *they were exploring* or *we were praying* or *she was singing* are all translations of Latin imperfect tense verbs.

A little later you will learn a few other ways the imperfect tense is sometimes translated, but for now, learn that the imperfect is translated with *was or were . . . -ing*.

## Forming the imperfect tense

Forming the imperfect tense is easy. First you form the verb stem, and then you add the imperfect tense endings.

Remember that to form the verb stem, you drop the **-re** of the infinitive. For **clāmāre**, the verb stem is **clāmā-**; for **temptāre** the verb stem is **temptā-**; for **habitāre** the verb stem is **habitā-**. (For a regular *first conjugation* verb stem, notice how the stem ends in—what letter?)

After you form the verb stem, you add the imperfect endings. Let's look at the imperfect tense endings now. See if you notice anything interesting about the end of the endings and the beginning of the endings. The table that shows the endings is on the next page.

By the way, you will notice that forming the imperfect tense is even easier than forming the present tense.

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## The imperfect tense endings

I was . . .	-bam	-bāmus	we were . . .
you (s.) were . . .	-bās	-bātis	you (pl.) were . . .
he, she, it was . . .	-bat	-bant	they were . . .

What do you notice about the end of the endings? The end of the endings is **-m**, **-s**, **-t**, **-mus**, **-tis**, **-nt**! These *should* look familiar. These are the personal endings you learned in Chapter 3, except that **-m** is used instead of **-ō**, just as it is in **sum** (Chapter 7). So the very end of the imperfect tense endings tells you *who*.

If the very end of the imperfect tense endings tells you *who*, then which part do you think tells you *was or were*? Look at the endings again and find the two letters that tell you *was or were*. Yes, *the beginning of the imperfect ending*, **-bā-** or **-ba-**, tells you *was or were*. The **-bā-** or **-ba-** is the *tense sign*, because it tells you the tense of your verb—the imperfect tense.

Actually, it is better to say that **-bā-** or **-ba-** tells you your verb is imperfect tense, rather than to say that **-bā-** or **-ba-** tells you *was or were*. Remember, you will learn later that there are other translations of the imperfect tense besides *was . . . -ing* and *were . . . -ing*. But the imperfect is *often* translated with *was or were . . . -ing*.

Why does the table translate **-bam** as *I was . . .* and not just *I was*? To show that the *was* that **-bam** translates is a helping verb, not a linking verb. Maybe you didn't know that *was* can be a helping verb, but it can be. For example, in *I was munching on watercress*, *was* is a helping verb—just as *am* is a helping verb in *I am munching*. You would use the imperfect tense to translate *I was munching* into Latin, and you would use the **-bam** ending for the *I was . . .* part of the verb. The *dot dot dot* helps us remember that **-bam**, along with the other imperfect endings, isn't a word we can use alone. It's just an ending.

To put it another way, you can't use **-bam** to translate *was* when *was* is a *linking verb*! If someone says *I was the pumpkin in our school play*, here *was* is a *linking verb*. You know that *am* can be a linking verb. Well, *was* is like *am*, only it describes the past, not the present. *I am a pumpkin today*; *I was a pumpkin in the play*. (*Pumpkin*, please notice, is a predicate nominative. It describes the subject, *I*, of the linking verb *was*.) For this kind of *was*—linking verb *was*—and also linking verb *were*, Latin uses separate words, words you have not learned yet. So always say the *dot dot dot* when you recite your imperfect tense endings. It will remind you that these are *just endings*.

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Now that you know the imperfect tense endings, let's put them to work by conjugating a first conjugation verb in the imperfect tense.

Let's conjugate **intrō** in the imperfect tense. First we form the verb stem. How? We drop the **-re** from the infinitive, **intrāre**. The verb stem is **intrā-**. Then we add the imperfect tense endings. Pay careful attention to which *endings* have a long sign, and which do not! I'll say more about that in a moment.

### The imperfect tense of "intrō"

I was entering	intrābam	intrābāmus	we were entering
you (s.) were entering	intrābās	intrābātis	you (pl.) were entering
he, she, it was entering	intrābat	intrābant	they were entering

Notice how *before* the imperfect tense endings a regular first conjugation verb always has a long **ā** which comes from the infinitive. This vowel—the last vowel of the stem—is called the stem vowel, and the first conjugation stem vowel is long **ā**. *The long stem vowel stays long.*

But now notice which *endings* have a long sign, and which do not: **-bam**, **-bās**, **-bat**, **-bāmus**, **-bātis**, **-bant**. The Romans shortened long vowels before certain other letters. They did this before **-m** or **-t** at the end of a word; that's why we have **-bam** (**intrābam**) and **-bat** (**intrābat**). And they shortened long vowels before **-nt** anywhere in a word; that's why we have **-bant** (**intrābant**).

Let's conjugate one more verb in the imperfect tense, for comparison. We'll do **explōrō**. First we form the stem by dropping the **-re** of the infinitive. The infinitive is **explōrāre**; the verb stem is **explōrā-**. Now we add the imperfect tense endings.

### The imperfect tense of "explōrō"

I was exploring	explōrābam	explōrābāmus	we were exploring
you (s.) were exploring	explōrābās	explōrābātis	you (pl.) were exploring
he, she, it was exploring	explōrābat	explōrābant	they were exploring

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By the way, have you noticed how once again, you translate your Latin verbs from the end first? To translate **explōrābāmus**, first you translate **–mus**: *we*. Then **–bā–**: *were . . .* And finally, **explōr–**.

## Other ways to translate the imperfect tense

You've learned that the basic translation of the imperfect tense is *was or were . . . –ing*. The imperfect tense can be translated many other ways. Which translation is best depends on the *context*. The context is the situation surrounding the verb. If you have a Latin verb in the imperfect tense which you could translate as *they were munching*, other possible translations are *they kept munching* or *they used to munch*. (And there are more!) For now, translate an imperfect tense verb with *was or were . . . –ing*, unless your teacher asks you to try out these other translations. But do notice that these other translations are also *past and ongoing*—just like *was or were . . . –ing*.

Are you ready for some complete sentences?

**Parva puella cūriōsa casam dēsertam tacitē intrābat.**

*A curious little girl was quietly entering the deserted cottage.*

**Puellam sēcrētē spectābāmus!**

*We were secretly watching the girl!*

**Puella in casā habitābat.** (Try *used to* in your translation.)

*The girl used to live in the cottage.*

**Tacitē spectābāmus.** (Try *kept* in your translation.)

*We kept watching quietly.*

**Lupus spectābat!**

*A wolf was watching!*

And we certainly hope the little girl escaped from the wolf. Happy translating!