

The passé composé is used in French in answer the question 'What happened?' On the other hand, you will usually put a verb in the imparfait if it answers the question 'What was going on when something else happened?' Generally, the passé composé is used to relate events while the imparfait is used to describe what was going on in the past, states of being in the past, or past habits.

All this takes on special importance in narration of past actions, when both tenses often occur in the same story. Narrating a story entails both describing a setting (habitual actions, atmosphere, places and people) and recounting a plot or a series of events, actions, changes of feelings or thoughts. In general, all stories have a well delineated plot line of events, the foreground, and a background of supporting details and description. Some literary texts might subvert this rule but this is out of a conscious effort to surprise or unsettle their reader.

### imparfait (set scene)

Avant, Tammy **habitait** à Fort Worth ...

Before, Tammy lived in Fort Worth ...

### passé composé (event)

et puis un jour, elle **a déménagé**.

and then, one day, she moved.

The following adverbs are commonly associated with each of the past tenses:

### adverbs/imparfait

**tous les jours, tous les matins ...**

every day, every morning

**chaque jour, chaque matin, chaque mois ...**

each day, each morning, each month

**en général, généralement, d'habitude ...**

in general, usually

**autrefois, à l'époque ...**

in the past, long ago, at the time

**toujours, souvent ...**

always, often

**rarement ...**

rarely

### adverbs/passé composé

**un jour, un matin, un soir ...**

one day, one morning, one evening

**soudain, brusquement, brutalement ...**

suddenly, abruptly, brusquely

**tout d'un coup, tout à coup ...**

all of a sudden, suddenly

**tout de suite, immédiatement ...**

right away, immediately

**d'abord, enfin ...**

first of all, finally

**puis, ensuite ...**

then, next

Usually, when verbs like **être**, **avoir**, **pouvoir**, **vouloir**, and **savoir** are in a past narration, they will be in the imparfait, since they most likely describe a **past state of being or condition**. However, when these verbs (and others like them) occur in the passé composé, they indicate a **change of state or a change of condition**. Compare these examples:



 Tammy: Quand j'**avais** 15 ans, j'**habitais** à

Tammy: When I was 15, I used to live in

Fort Worth.

Quand j'**ai eu** 18 ans, j'**ai déménagé** à Austin.

When I turned 18, I moved to Austin.

The passé composé is also generally used for activities that lasted for a **precise length of time**, with a definite beginning and end. On the other hand, the imparfait is used for **indefinite lengths of time**. Look at these examples:



**definite period of time:**

De 1997 à 1998,

Pendant un an,

Entre dix-huit et dix-neuf ans,

Tex **a été** vendeur de T-shirts.

**indefinite period of time:**

Avant,

Quand il était enfant,

A cette époque-là,

Tex **était** dans un couvent de Lyon.

But ultimately it is the entire context that determines which of these two past tenses to use and not a given adverb. For example, in the sentences below, the same adverb, **un jour**, is used with the imperfect or the passé composé according to the context.



Un jour, Tex **vendait** des T-shirts à Paris quand il a été arrêté pour activité illégale.

One day, Tex was selling T-shirts in Paris when he was arrested for illegal activity. (The imparfait sets the scene to be interrupted)

Un jour, les autorités françaises **ont expulsé** Tex.

One day, the French authorities deported Tex. (Event)

In the following story, note how the narration opens with an extended description of Tex' early childhood in the imparfait, which serves as explanatory background to the plot-line events in the passé composé.



Quand Tex **était** tout petit, il **habitait** dans la banlieue de Houston avec sa famille. Ce petit tatou, curieux de nature, **aimait** toujours faire de longues promenades avec ses amis pour explorer les coins et recoins de la banlieue, surtout les autoroutes!

When Tex was very small, he lived in the suburbs of Houston with his family. This little armadillo, curious by nature, always loved to take long walks with his friends to explore the nooks and crannies of the suburbs, above all the highways!

Un jour, pendant une promenade, il **s'est perdu**. Heureusement, après des heures et des heures, il **a trouvé** l'entrée de l'aéroport Bush International. Fasciné par le bruit et le mouvement, il **s'est précipité** vers les avions. Tandis qu'il **examinait** un avion de plus près, un homme l'a brusquement **pris** et il l'**a jeté** à l'intérieur avec les bagages. Huit heures plus tard, l'avion **est arrivé** à Paris, où Tex commencerait sa nouvelle vie française!

One day, during a walk, he got lost. Fortunately, after hours and hours, he found the entrance to the Bush International Airport. Fascinated by all the noise and motion, he rushed to the planes. As he was examining a plane more closely, a man abruptly took him and threw him inside with the baggage. Eight hours later, the plane arrived in Paris, where Tex would start his new French life!

Tex **a passé** le reste de son enfance en

Tex spent the rest of his childhood in

France. En fait, il **est devenu** cent pour cent français. Quand il **était** adolescent, il **se considérait** comme un disciple de Sartre. Il ne **connaissait** rien au baseball et **détestait** tout ce qui **était** américain. Mais en 1998, tout d'un coup sa vie **a changé** quand il **a découvert** que ses parents **étaient** ... américains.

France. In fact, he became one hundred per cent French. When he was an adolescent, he considered himself a disciple of Sartre. He knew nothing about baseball and he detested everything American. But in 1998, all of a sudden, his life changed when he discovered that his parents were ... American.



TEX SE CONSIDÉRAIT  
COMME UN DISCIPLE  
DE SARTRE