The Imperfect Tense

The imperfect tense describes the background or existing state of affairs in the past at a time when an action took place:

> eg. *"Quand je me suis levé, j'avais très mal aux dents."*

The imperfect sets the stage. Consider in the English sentences which follow, how the underlined verbs provide details of the scenery and existing conditions. The equivalent verbs in French would be in the **imperfect tense.**

> *" All <u>was</u> quiet in the house on Medway Street, thought it <u>was</u> already 8:00. The sun <u>was</u> <u>shining</u>, and a soft spring breeze <u>was blowing</u>. In Paul's room the curtains <u>were</u> drawn, and Paul <u>snored</u> on. On his bedside table <u>was</u> an alarm clock whose hands <u>were</u> stopped at 2:45. Suddenly, the door to Paul's room burst open, and his sister Anne came into the room. She pounced on Paul's bed shouting, "Wake up! you're going to be late for school!"*

The underlined verbs provide the stage setting -- weather, the time of day, Paul asleep in bed -- all the background for the action of Anne bursting into his room and jumping on his bed.

Sometimes the "existing conditions" take the form of a continued or <u>uncompleted action</u> in the past.

"Il m'a dit qu'il allait au zoo."
"Il savait que je l'attendais ici à onze heures."

Imparfait ou passé composé:

The imperfect sets the stage & provides the scenery in describing an action that happened in past. The <u>passé composé</u> tells <u>what happened</u>. That action is always a completed action.

> eg.   *Je <u>suis allé</u> au lac.*
>   *J'<u>ai attrapé</u> deux poissons. Je les <u>ai mangés</u>.*

- Watch for clues that indicate whether the action was habitual (repeated) or not. (Words such as <u>toujours</u>, <u>souvent</u>, <u>le samedi</u> etc.)
If it's habitual action in the past, the imperfect tense is used.

The following verbs are more often found in the imperfect than in passé composé since they describe situations and not actions: *"être, avoir, pouvoir, savoir, vouloir, aimer"*

In representing a past situation, one must first choose between the imperfect and the passé composé tenses. Both tenses can describe the same past moment in time, but they do so from different points of view.

A) The passé composé tense adopts a point of view from which a past action (state or repetition) can be seen to end and/or to begin. It is often used to tell stories in which actions (states or repetitions) take place one after the other, sequentially.
Examples:
<u>**Story Sequence of actions**</u>: Après que **j'ai quitté** Paris, **j'ai voyagé** à Lyon. **Ensuite**, **je suis parti** pour Nice.
<u>**Story Sequence of Completed States:**</u> Paul **a été** triste, mais il **est devenu** heureux.
<u>**Story Sequence of Beginning States or Actions**</u> En voyant la mer à Nice, j'**ai eu** peur et je **me suis enfui**.

NOTE: The Passé Composé can serve to represent a past action from a past point of view or from a present point of view. In the latter case, the passé composé simply marks anteriority to the present and completedness. It can be translated "have + now + past participle": Nous avons fini notre travail= We have (now) finished our work.

B) The imperfect tense adopts a past point of view from which a state (action or repetition) appears ongoing. It puts the reader in the middle of this ongoing state (action \or repetition) and says nothing about whether it began or ended.
The imperfect is thus often used to describe states (such as mental or physical states), ongoing actions, and habitual repetitions.
The imperfect is also used to describe background. If you find several verbs in the imperfect tense, this generally means that the states or actions that these verbs signify all take place at the same time (simultaneously) and that they constitute the background for the story.

Examples:
Ongoing simultaneous states: A Lyon, **j'avais** froid tous les jours. Je n'**étais** pas content.
Ongoing simultaneous actions: A Paris, je **vivais** à Montmartre et je **travaillais** au Louvre.
Habitual repetitions: Tous les jours à Paris, je **dînais** dans un restaurant et je **me promenais** dans le parc.

NOTE: Unlike the passé composé, the imperfect tense represents states (actions or repetitions) only from a past point of view, never from a present point of view. It implies that a state (action or repetition) was incomplete or ongoing at a particular past time. The imperfect tense thus tells the reader or listener that the speaker is focusing on a past situation, just as the present tense indicates that the speaker is focusing on a present situation.

C) 1) When combined, the imperfect generally constructs the background and the passé composé the foreground of a past situation. The imperfect tense usually describes what continues to exist (simultaneously) in the background, whereas the passé composé narrates the events that take place sequentially in the foreground:
Examples:
Tous les jours à Paris, **j'avais** froid. Je n'**étais** pas content. Un jour, j'**ai décidé** de chercher quelque chose pour me divertir. J'**ai pris** le métro et j'**ai voyagé** partout à Paris, mais je **n'ai pas réussi** à me rendre heureux.

C)2) The imperfect puts us in the middle of a continuous state (action or repetition), while the passé composé makes us see an action (state or repetition) as change:
Examples:
Alors, **j'ai quitté** Paris et **j'ai pris** le train de Lyon.
A Lyon, **j'étais** content (the imperfect focuses on my emotional state in Lyon as continuous).
Après mon arrivée à Lyon, **j'ai été** content (the passé composé focuses on the change in my emotional state, an event, after I arrived at Lyon).

NOTE: Verbs expressing states (être, avoir), such as mental states (croire), are usually put in the imperfect tense, unless you wish to point out that the state began or ended. Verbs expressing actions (courir, monter) are usually put in the passé composé tense, unless you wish to point out that the action was ongoing or habitual.

Plus-que-parfait – French Past Perfect or Pluperfect

The term "**plus-que-parfait**" suggests "more in the past than the perfect." The tense is used to indicate actions which took place *before* another action in the past, which is usually (though not always) described in the perfect (**passé composé**). However, the **plus-que-parfait** is not <u>always</u> used when one action precedes another; for example, a list of actions in chronological order may well be put in the **passé composé** alone. Compare these two sentences:

1. **Le réveil a sonné, je me suis levé, et j'ai pris mon déjeuner.**
   The alarm rang, I got up, and I had breakfast.

2. **Elle a appris à aimer le chien qui l'avait mordue.**
   She learned to love the dog that had bitten her.

In both sentences certain actions precede others; however, only the second sentence seeks to emphasize the precedence of one action. The **plus-que-parfait** is used when the speaker needs to position one action with respect to another. Frequently its use will be signaled by adverbs (such as **déjà**) which can heighten the sense of opposition between actions:

- Quand je suis rentré, j'avais déjà appris la mauvaise nouvelle.
  When I got home, I had already heard the bad news.
- Les enfants ont mangé tous les gâteaux que leur père avait achetés.
  The children ate all the cookies that their father had bought.

Sometimes the action the **plus-que-parfait** precedes will not be explicit, but will be implied in the sentence:

- Elle avait déjà pensé à cela. She had already thought of that.

Formation of the plus-que-parfait

The French past perfect is a compound conjugation, which means it has two parts:

1. imperfect of the auxiliary verb (either avoir or être)

2. past participle of the main verb

Note: Like all French compound conjugations, the past perfect may be subject to grammatical agreement:

- When the auxiliary verb is *être*, the past participle must agree with the subject

- When the auxiliary verb is *avoir*, the past participle may have to agree with its direct object

French past perfect conjugations

AIMER (auxiliary verb is <u>avoir</u>)

j'	**avais aimé**	nous	**avions aimé**
tu	**avais aimé**	vous	**aviez aimé**
il, elle	**avait aimé**	ils, elles	**avaient aimé**

DEVENIR (<u>être verb</u>)

j'	**étais devenu(e)**	nous	**étions devenus(es)**
tu	**étais devenu(e)**	vous	**étiez devenu(e)(s)(es)**
il	**était devenu**	ils	**étaient devenus**
elle	**était devenue**	elles	**étaient devenues**

SE LAVER (<u>pronominal verb</u>)

je	**m'étais lavé(e)**	nous	**nous étions lavé(e)s**
tu	**t'étais lavé(e)**	vous	**vous étiez lavé(e)(s)**
il	**s'était lavé**	ils	**s'étaient lavés**
elle	**s'était lavée**	elles	**s'étaient lavées**