Passé Composé and *Imparfait*
Compared

The basic uses of the *passé composé* and the *imparfait* tenses are summarized in the chart below.

PASSÉ COMPOSÉ

1. Expresses specific actions or events that were started and completed at a definite point in the past.

    Il a fait ses devoirs.
    He did his homework.

2. Expresses a specific action or event at a specific point in past time.
    Aujourd'hui, il est arrivé à neuf h.
    Today, he arrived at 9:00.

    Elle a joué au tennis hier soir.
    She played tennis last night.

IMPARFAIT

1. Describes ongoing or continuous actions or events in the past.

    Il faisait ses devoirs.
    He was doing his homework.

2. Describes habitual or repeated actions or events in the past.

    Il arrivait généralement à neuf h.
    He generally arrived at 9:00.

3. Describes persons, things, or a state of mind in the past.

    Elle était nerveuse.
    She was nervous.

    Les oiseaux chantaient.
    The birds were singing.

    Il savait danser.
    He knew how to dance.

NOTE:
1. The *passé composé* expresses an action or event repeated a specific number of times in the past.

    | *Cet été je suis allé(e) à la plage deux fois.* | *This summer I went to the beach twice.* |

    BUT

    | *J'allais à la plage le samedi.* | *I used to go to the beach on Saturday.* |

RETOURNEZ!!!

2. The *passé composé* is usually equivalent to an English simple past and the *imparfait* to the English was (were)…-ing, used to, and would (meaning used to.)

Hier, il a neigé pendant deux heures.   Yesterday it snowed for two hours.

Il neigeait pendant qu'ils marchaient.   It was snowing while they were walking.

3. The *passé composé* is often used (but not limited to) with the following words and expressions:

d'abord   at first
dernier(ière)   last
enfin   finally
ensuite   then, next
finalement   finally
une fois   once
deux fois   twice
trois fois   three times
plusieurs fois   several times
hier   yesterday
hier soir   last night
l'autre jour   the other day
ce jour-là   that day
un jour   one day
soudain   suddenly
tout à coup   all of a sudden

4. The *imparfait* is often used (but not limited to) with the following adverbial expressions when they imply repetition.

autrefois   formerly
chaque(time)   each
en general   generally
généralement   generally
d'habitude   usually
habituellement   habitually
parfois   sometimes
quelquefois   sometimes
souvent   often
toujours   always
tous les jours   every day
tout le temps   all the time
en ce temps-là   at that time
de temps en temps from time to time

5. The *imparfait* is used to describe an action or event that was going on in the past when another action or event took place. The action or event that took place is in the *passé composé*.
Je sortais quand Luc a téléphoné.   *I was leaving when Luc called.*

6. The *imparfait* is often used with verbs that express a state of mind over a period of time in the past.

aimer
croire
désirer
espérer
être
penser
pouvoir
préférer
regretter
savoir
vouloir

J'espérais qu'il savait le réparer.   *I hoped he knew how to fix it.*
Il aimiat faire le ménage.   *He liked to do the house cleaning.*