Introduction to the Preterit Tense: Forms of Verbs

The preterite tense indicates past time. Other names for Preterit include: *simple past, one-verb past, narrative past, imperfect*

Weak Verbs (schwach)

verb stem
tense marker t
conjugational endings

glauben
machen
fragen
reisen
sagen

ich	-te		wir	-ten
du	-test		ihr	-tet
er/sie/es	-te		sie /Sie	-ten
ich	sagte		wir	sagten
du	sagtest		ihr	sagtet
er/sie/es	sagte		sie /Sie	sagten

Strong Verbs (stark)

verb stem + Ablaut
no tense marker
conjugational endings

gehen → ging
sehen → sah
kommen → kam
helfen → half
fahren → fuhr

ich	Ø		wir	-en
du	-(e)st		ihr	-(e)t
er/sie/es	Ø		sie /Sie	-en
ich	kam		wir	kamen
du	kamst		ihr	kamt
er/sie/es	kam		sie /Sie	kamen

Weak Irregular Verbs (gemischt) & Prätero-Präsens Verbs

verb stem + Ablaut
tense marker t
conjugational endings

bringen → brach
denken → dach
wissen → wuss
mögen → moch

ich	-te		wir	-ten
du	-test		ihr	-tet
er/sie/es	-te		sie /Sie	-ten
ich	wusste		wir	wussten
du	wusstest		ihr	wusstet
er/sie/es	wusste		sie /Sie	wussten

Three Irregular Verbs

haben		*werden*		*sein*	
hatte	hatten	wurde	wurden	war	waren
hattest	hattet	wurdest	wurdet	warst	wart
hatte	hatten	wurde	wurden	war	waren

Introduction to the German Preterit Tense (das Präteritum)

Präteritum & Perfekt

The preterit tense (das Präteritum) is used to indicate past time. German uses the preterit tense along with the perfect tense (das Perfekt) to indicate actions that happened in the past.

Präteritum for Narratives

Preterit and perfect are nearly interchangeable, although the preterit is used typically when writing or telling a story where the events are a connected narrative such as in fiction (novels, short, stories, fairy tales, and the like). In letter writing, newspaper reporting and general recounting of events, the perfect tense is typically chosen over the preterit. In the spoken language, the perfect tense is generally preferred over the preterit. When speaking, the beginning student of German should strive to use the perfect rather than the preterit. However, in reading, especially fiction, the reader is far more likely to encounter the preterit.

Präteritum over Perfekt

Certain verbs tend to appear more frequently in the preterit than perfect for expressing actions in the past, even outside of a narrative context. The six modal verbs are far more likely to appear in their preterit form as opposed to the perfect form when expressing past time. The three irregular verbs, *haben, werden, sein,* very frequently take the preterit over the perfect to express past action. The preterit of several common verbs such as *kommen, gehen, denken,* appears as frequently in spoken language as the perfect.

Weak & Strong Verbs

There are two conjugational patterns in the preterit. Weak verbs take one set of conjugational patterns (stem + endings) while strong verbs take Ablaut plus a separate set of conjugational endings. (See chart on reverse side.) Students of German must learn which verbs are strong and memorize the ablaut for each.

Conventions in Reference Works

A general convention exists in the classification of verb types. If a dictionary contains a verb list, weak verbs are usually not included in the list. Only strong, weak irregular, and fully irregular verbs are included in the verb list. If you look for a verb on the list, and it is not included in the list, then that verb is probably weak and follows the fully predictable pattern.

Examples

Präteritum (for stories, fiction, etc.)	*Perfekt* (for general reporting of past events)	*Translation* (wk = weak verb / str = strong verb)
Er setzte das Glas auf den Tisch.	Er hat das Glas auf den Tisch gesetzt.	(wk) He put the glass on the table.
Sie reiste nach Russland.	Sie ist nach Russland gereist.	(wk) She traveled to Russia.
Das Kind spielte im Garten.	Das Kind hat im Garten gespielt.	(wk) The child was playing in the garden.
Er ging nach Hause.	Er ist nach Hause gegangen.	(str) He went home.
Sie sprach sehr leise.	Sie hat sehr leise gesprochen.	(str) She spoke very softly.
Das Mädchen sah nichts.	Das Mädchen hat nichts gesehen.	(str) The girl didn't see anything.