In the two sets of sentences above, how are the sentences in the left column different than the sentences in the right column? How does the verb tense affect the message that is communicated?

**Introduction**

The **preterit** and the **imperfect** focus on different aspects of something that happened in the past. The preterit concentrates on the beginning, the end, or the entirety of a completed past action, state, or condition. The imperfect centers on the "not finished" nature of that action, state, or condition in the past. That is, it is something that continued in the past. There are some **modal auxiliary verbs** that do not show action, but rather a state. In Spanish, they are conjugated in the two different past tenses in order to show the desired aspect. However, in English, sometimes a completely different verb is needed to specify the aspect of these **verbs of state**. In other words, they "**change meaning**." Since these verbs are modal auxiliary verbs, they are used very often. Special care should be taken to learn to use them well.

**Preterit vs. Imperfect: Modal Auxiliary Verbs of State**

Some verbs actually "**change meaning,"** depending on whether they are conjugated in the preterit or in the imperfect. This is not surprising. But how does it happen?

Remember that a story could change depending on which past tense was used? Here are some examples of that. Some verbs "change their meaning" depending on whether they are conjugated in the preterit or in the imperfect because they focus on different aspects. This only happens with verbs that show a state of being. It doesn’t happen with action verbs.

Look at how these verbs are used in both the preterit and the imperfect. Pay attention to the different verbs that are needed to translate these modal auxiliary verbs from the Spanish preterit and imperfect past tenses.

**SABER** ("to know [about]" or "to be aware of")

- **María supo la verdad ayer.** (María **found out** / **learned** the truth yesterday.)
  - The preterit narrates completed actions. Here it marks the beginning of knowing something. This is translated in English as "found out" or "learned."
- **Juan sabía la verdad por muchos años.** (Juan **knew** the truth for many years.)
  - The imperfect does not focus on a definite beginning or ending, but rather on the "knowing" of something over an indefinite period of time in the past.

**CONOCER** ("to know" or "to be familiar with")
• **Conoció a Juan hace cinco años.** (I met Juan five years ago.)
  - The preterit narrates completed actions. Here it marks the beginning of knowing someone. This is translated in English as "met."
• **En aquella época conocíamos muy bien la ciudad.** (At that time we knew the city very well.)
  - The imperfect does not focus on a definite beginning or ending, but rather on the "knowing" of someone over an indefinite period of time in the past.

**PODER** ("to be able" or "can")
• **María pudo hacer los quehaceres domésticos.** (María succeeded in doing the chores.)
  - The preterit narrates completed actions. Here marks the end result of having been able to do something. This is translated in English as "succeeded in" or "managed to"
• **Juan podía jugar muy bien.** (Juan was able to play very well.)
  - The imperfect does not focus on a definite beginning or ending, but rather on the "being able" to do something over an indefinite period of time in the past.

**QUERER** ("to want" or "to wish")
• **María quiso comprar el coche.** (María tried to buy the car.)
  - The preterit narrates completed actions. Here it marks the end result of having wanted and tried to do something. This is translated in English as "tried."
• **Juan quería comprar la casa.** (Juan wanted to buy the house.)
  - The imperfect does not focus on a definite beginning or ending, but rather on the "wanting" to do something over an indefinite period of time in the past.

**NO QUERER** ("to not want" or "to not wish")
• **María no quiso comprar la casa.** (María refused to buy the house.)
  - The preterit narrates completed actions. Here it marks the end result of not wanting something or not wanting to do something. This is translated in English as "refused."
• **Juan no quería comprar la casa.** (Juan did not want to buy the house.)
  - The imperfect does not focus on a definite beginning or ending, but rather on the not wanting something or the not wanting to do something over an indefinite period of time in the past.

**TENER** ("to have")
• **María tuvo noticias de su madre.** (Mary received news from her mother.)
  - The preterit narrates completed actions. Here it marks the beginning of having something. This is translated in English as "received."
• **Juan tenía un coche nuevo.** (Juan used to have a new car.)
  - The imperfect does not focus on a definite beginning or ending, but rather on the having something over an indefinite period of time.
The following table summarizes the "meaning changes" for modal auxiliary verbs of state in the preterit and imperfect tenses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbs of State</th>
<th>Infinite</th>
<th>Preterit</th>
<th>Imperfect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>conocer</strong></td>
<td>to know; to be familiar with</td>
<td>met and began knowing</td>
<td>knew (a place or an acquaintance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>saber</strong></td>
<td>to know (about); to be aware of</td>
<td>found out; learned</td>
<td>knew (something)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>poder</strong></td>
<td>to be able; can</td>
<td>had the ability to do something and did it; succeeded in</td>
<td>Managed to do something; was/were able to do something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>querer</strong></td>
<td>to want; to wish</td>
<td>wanted to do something and tried to do it</td>
<td>wanted to do something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>no querer</strong></td>
<td>to not want; to not wish</td>
<td>didn't want to do something and refused to do it</td>
<td>did not want to do something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>tener</strong></td>
<td>to have</td>
<td>got or received something and began having it</td>
<td>Possessed something; used to have something</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practice Questions

To check your understanding of the "meaning changes" between the preterit and imperfect tenses for modal auxiliary verbs of state, do the following exercises.

A. Sentence Completion: Preterite vs. Imperfect
Fill in the blanks in the following sentences using the correct form of the preterit or imperfect. You will need to read and figure out from the context whether the verb should be in the preterit or imperfect.

1. Anoche yo ________ (saber) el nombre del muchacho guapo que está en mi clase de cálculo.
2. Hacía mucho tiempo que mi profesor ________ (saber) hablar español.
3. Hace dos días que mi hermana ________ (tener) una invitación a una fiesta.
4. Cuando tú ________ (tener) quince años saliste en tu primera cita social.
5. Ellos ________ (querer) hablar con el director de la escuela ayer pero no pudieron.
6. Mis primos siempre ________ (querer) ser jugadores profesionales de fútbol.
7. Hace diez años que el señor Ramírez ________ (conocer) a su esposa en un baile.
8. Uds. ya ________ (conocer) a Josefina desde antes.
9. La semana pasada Pablo no ________ (querer) asistir a su clase de historia.
10. El martes pasado por la tarde ________ (haber) un accidente en esta esquina.
11. ¿Cuánta gente ________ (haber) en la calle cuando ocurrió el accidente?
12. ¿ ________ (poder) abrir las persianas José?
13. Siempre las ________ (poder) abrir antes.

B. Sentence Translation:
Translate the following sentences from English to Spanish. Be sure to use what you have learned about verbs that change meaning.

1. Raúl refused to attend church on last Sunday.

___________________________________________________________.

2. Pilar met her husband 15 years ago at a party.

___________________________________________________________.

3. María and Elena always wanted to be professional dancers.

___________________________________________________________.

4. Last night I found out my favorite television program was cancelled.

___________________________________________________________.

5. We managed to complete our Biology project on time.

___________________________________________________________.

6. There were many people at Nubia’s party.

___________________________________________________________.
7. I always knew I wanted to be a pilot.

C. Writing Exercise

Write 6 original sentences using the following verbs: querer, saber, tener, haber, conocer, and poder in the past tenses.

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

5. 

6. 