

Chapter 1

Been There, Done That: Talking in the Past Tense

In This Chapter

- ▶ Building the present perfect tense
 - ▶ Picking apart the past absolute
 - ▶ Investigating the imperfect
 - ▶ Giving nuance to verb meanings
-

No matter how much you live in the present, you spend a lot of time talking about the past. You tell people where you're from, where you've been, and how long you've been doing something. Whether something occurred in the last ten minutes or the last ten years, understanding how to express events in the past tense is key to communicating in any language.

The past tenses in English are easy to use, if often irregular in form. In Italian, the past tenses are also frequently irregular. But in Italian, it gets a little more complicated: Past tense constructions require a knowledge of *conditions* that English doesn't. For example, in English, you may say *The kids went to school in Chicago*. In Italian, the verb you use for *went* depends on when the kids went to school in Chicago. Did they always go there? Did they go for a summer program? More than once? Was it a hundred years ago?

In English, you supply this information with elaboration. *The kids went to school in Chicago during the 2012 to 2013 school year*. Or during their childhood. Or around the turn of the last century. Or for summer programs in general. Or for specific summer programs. In Italian, if this information isn't directly stated, you imply it by the tense of the verb you use.

This chapter shows you how to be this specific as you express events in the past tense. This chapter walks you through constructing the present perfect (**passato prossimo**, or the near past), the past absolute (**passato remoto**, or the distant past), and the imperfect (**imperfetto**, or the habitual, repeated, or ongoing past) and helps you understand when to use each one. (Check out Chapter 2 in Book V for specifics on using reflexive verbs in these tenses.)

Forming the Present Perfect Tense

Use the *present perfect* to talk about completed actions in the past. The present perfect is a compound verb, so it takes two words. One is the past participle, such as **guardato** (*looked*), **cotto** (*baked*), **comprato** (*bought*), **domandato** (*asked*), and **detto** (*said*); the other is a helping verb — **essere** (*to be*) or **avere** (*to have*) — conjugated in the present tense.

Past participles



To form a regular past participle, remove the characteristic **-are**, **-ere**, and **-ire** endings from infinitives (unconjugated verbs) and replace them with **-ato**, **-uto**, or **-ito**, as shown with some examples in Table 1-1.

<i>Infinitive</i>	<i>Past Participle</i>
cercare (<i>to look for</i>)	cercato (<i>looked for</i>)
guardare (<i>to look at</i>)	guardato (<i>looked at</i>)
mangiare (<i>to eat</i>)	mangiato (<i>eaten</i>)
parlare (<i>to speak</i>)	parlato (<i>spoken</i>)
credere (<i>to believe; to think</i>)	creduto (<i>believed; thought</i>)
potere (<i>to be able</i>)	potuto (<i>to have been able</i>)
ricevere (<i>to receive</i>)	ricevuto (<i>received</i>)
volere (<i>to want</i>)	voluto (<i>wanted</i>)
capire (<i>to understand</i>)	capito (<i>understood</i>)
dormire (<i>to sleep</i>)	dormito (<i>slept</i>)
partire (<i>to leave</i>)	partito (<i>left</i>)
sentire (<i>to hear</i>)	sentito (<i>heard</i>)

Italian past participles correspond to their English counterparts, which often end in *-ed* such as *looked*. However, many irregular English past participles don't end in *-ed*, such as *bought*, *saw*, and *read*. Italian, too, has many irregular past participles. Some verbs even have two forms to choose from, such as **perdere** and **vedere** in Table 1-2.

Table 1-2 Forming the Irregular Past Participle for Verbs That Conjugate with *Avere*

<i>Infinitive</i>	<i>Past Participle</i>
fare (<i>to make; to do</i>)	fatto (<i>made; done</i>)
accendere (<i>to light; to turn on</i>)	acceso (<i>lit; turned on</i>)
chiedere (<i>to ask</i>)	chiesto (<i>asked</i>)
chiudere (<i>to close</i>)	chiuso (<i>closed</i>)
decidere (<i>to decide</i>)	deciso (<i>decided</i>)
leggere (<i>to read</i>)	letto (<i>read</i>)
mettere (<i>to put; to place</i>)	messo (<i>put; placed</i>)
perdere (<i>to lose</i>)	perduto, perso (<i>lost</i>)
prendere (<i>to take</i>)	preso (<i>taken</i>)
rispondere (<i>to reply</i>)	risposto (<i>replied</i>)
scrivere (<i>to write</i>)	scritto (<i>written</i>)
spegner (<i>to turn off</i>)	spento (<i>turned off</i>)
spendere (<i>to spend</i>)	speso (<i>spent</i>)
vedere (<i>to see</i>)	veduto, visto (<i>seen</i>)
vincere (<i>to win</i>)	vinto (<i>won</i>)
vivere (<i>to live</i>)	vissuto (<i>lived</i>)
aprire (<i>to open</i>)	aperto (<i>opened</i>)
dire (<i>to say; to tell</i>)	detto (<i>said; told</i>)
offrire (<i>to offer</i>)	offerto (<i>offered</i>)

Table 1-3 lists some irregular verbs that take **essere** in the past. For more on when to use which auxiliary, or helper, verb, see the following section.

Table 1-3 Irregular Past Tense Verbs That Take *Essere*

<i>Infinitive</i>	<i>Past Participle</i>
nascere (<i>to be born</i>)	nato (<i>born</i>)
rimanere (<i>to remain</i>)	rimasto (<i>remained</i>)
scendere (<i>to come; to go down</i>)	sceso (<i>fell</i>)

(continued)

Table 1-3 (continued)

<i>Infinitive</i>	<i>Past Participle</i>
morire (<i>to die</i>)	morto (<i>died</i>)
sopravvivere (<i>to survive</i>)	sopravvissuto (<i>survived</i>)
venire (<i>to come</i>)	venuto (<i>came</i>)
vivere (<i>to live</i>)	vissuto (<i>lived</i>)

You may have noticed that **vivere** appears in both Tables 1-2 and 1-3. Well, that's no mistake. You can use **vivere** with both **avere** and **essere**. You use **avere** when **vivere** is followed by a direct object, as in **Matusalemme ha vissuto una lunga vita** (*Methuselah has lived a long life*); you use **essere** when you specify space, location, or duration, such as **È vissuto a Milano e a Torino** (*He has lived in Milan and Turin*) or **È vissuta fino a 95 anni** (*She has lived 95 years*).



You can also use past participles as adjectives, as long as they agree in number and gender with what they're describing. For example, **la casa preferita** (*the favorite house*) is feminine and singular, so **preferita** is as well. **Il libro preferito** (*the favorite book*) is masculine and singular, so **preferito** reflects that. Speaking of an enthusiastic audience at a concert, the late Luciano Pavarotti urged the conductor to give an encore, and said **Si sono proprio riscaldati** (*They're really warmed up*). **Riscaldati** (from **riscaldare** [*to warm up*]) refers to members of the audience and is masculine and plural.

Auxiliary verbs: *Avere* and *essere*



To activate the past participles discussed in the preceding section, you need an auxiliary or helping verb, either **avere** (*to have*) or **essere** (*to be*) conjugated in the present tense.

- ✓ You use **avere** with *transitive verbs* — verbs that can (though don't always) take a direct object; they “transit” action from the subject to a direct object.
- ✓ You use **essere** with verbs that can't take a direct object, called *intransitive verbs*, which are frequently verbs of motion, of coming and going, of leaving and returning.

Transiting action with avere

Direct objects answer questions that ask *who* or *what*. For example:

Ho trovato la chiave (*I found the key*). What did I find? *The key*.

Lui ha scritto una lettera d'amore (*He wrote a love letter*). What did he write? *A love letter*.

Ho visto gli studenti (*I saw the students*). Who did I see? *The students*.

Think literally for a moment, and the conjugation with **avere** will make perfect sense. **Ho** (*I have*) + **trovato** (*found*); *I have found*. What did I find? **La chiave**. **Lui ha** (*he has*) + **scritto** (*written*); *he has written*. What has he written? **Una lettera d'amore**. **Ho** (*I have*) + **visto** (*seen*); *I have seen*. Who have I seen? **Gli studenti**. These three verbs answer the question *what* or *who* and direct the subjects' actions through the verbs to direct objects.

Note: Sometimes the direct object isn't stated but is understood. In this case, you still use **avere** to form the present perfect. The most commonly used verbs with unstated direct objects are **parlare** (*to speak*) because you speak speech, **dormire** (*to sleep*) because you sleep sleep, **sognare** (*to dream*) because you dream dreams, and **camminare** (*to walk*) because you, well, walk the walk.



Verbs with built-in prepositions in English, such as **cercare** (*to look for*), **aspettare** (*to wait for*), and **pagare** (*to pay for*), take direct object pronouns in Italian (though in English they usually take indirect object pronouns).

Moving with essere

Verbs of motion (going, coming, arriving, leaving, becoming) or of stopping motion (staying) don't take direct objects. They conjugate with **essere** rather than **avere**, and the subject and past participle agree in number and gender. Again, think literally for a moment. **Lui è** (*he is*) + **andato** (*gone*) **al cinema**. (*He went to the cinema*.) Or **lei è** (*she is*) + **andata** (*gone*) **al cinema**. (*She went to the cinema*.)

Note: All reflexive verbs conjugate in the present perfect with **essere**. See Chapter 2 in Book V for more about reflexive verbs in the present perfect.

Recognizing that some verbs use both avere and essere

Some verbs “cross-conjugate,” meaning they can use either **essere** or **avere** as a helper. Their meanings tell you which helper to use. For example, take **cambiare** (*to change*). It means one thing to say **ho cambiato casa** (*I changed houses*) (*I moved*) and quite another to say **sono cambiato** (*I have changed*) (Literally: *I am changed*).

Here's another example with **finire** (*to finish*). **Ho finito il libro** means *I finished/have finished the book*, but **la commedia è finita** means *the play is over* and **lui è finito in prigione** translates to *he ended up in prison*. The helping verb changes the meaning and function of the verb's past tense.



You don't really want to say **sono finito** because it doesn't mean *I'm finished/I'm done in*. Instead, it means *there is no hope for me*, or, by extension, *I'm dead*.



Conjugating verbs in the present perfect with avere

Putting a verb into the present perfect when the helper is **avere** involves three steps.

1. **Form a past participle from the infinitive (for example, mangiare becomes mangiato and preferire becomes preferito).**
2. **Conjugate avere in the present indicative tense (see Chapter 2 in Book IV) so that it reflects the subject (io ho, tu hai, and so on).**
3. **Combine the two forms, and you've arrived in the present perfect.**

The following table shows you how to conjugate **trovare** (*to find*) in the present perfect by using the helping verb **avere**.

trovare (<i>to find</i>)	
io ho trovato	noi abbiamo trovato
tu hai trovato	voi avete trovato
lui, lei, Lei ha trovato	loro, Loro hanno trovato

Here are some examples of the present perfect tense using **avere**:

Io ho mangiato tutti i biscotti. (*I ate all the cookies.*)

Hai scritto molte lettere oggi. (*You wrote many letters today.*)

Paolo ha letto due libri durante il fine settimana. (*Paolo read two books over the weekend.*)

Abbiamo ricevuto una bella lettera dalla zia. (*We received a lovely letter from our aunt.*)

Avete capito? (*Have you understood?*)

Hanno detto una bugia. (*They told a lie.*)



Avere verbs don't require you to make the participle agree with the subject. They do require agreement, however, if you use a direct object pronoun (see Chapter 3 in Book III). As with most pronouns, direct object pronouns precede the verb. They agree in number and gender with the noun they replace.

When direct object pronouns precede the conjugated **avere** verbs, they look like this:

Hanno visitato il museo. L'hanno visitato. (*They visited the museum. They visited it.*)

Lo (*it*) substitutes for **il museo**, but because it already agrees in number and gender with the participle, **visitato**, nothing changes. **Lo** does contract with **hanno**, in the interests of flow. Now compare these sentences:

Hanno visitato la chiesa. L'hanno visitata. (*They visited the church. They visited it.*)

La (*it*) substitutes for **la chiesa**, so the past participle, **visitata**, takes on a feminine, singular ending. Here are a couple more examples:

Ho comprato le scarpe. Le ho comprate. (*I bought the shoes. I bought them.*)

Hai visto gli amici? Li hai visti? (*Have you seen your friends? Have you seen them?*)

In the first example, **scarpe** are feminine plural, so the pronoun and the participle's ending are also feminine plural. In the second example, **gli amici**, masculine plural, requires the corresponding masculine plural ending on the participle.



The direct object pronouns **mi**, **ti**, **ci**, and **vi** don't require agreement between themselves and the past participle. Such agreement does still occur — **Lui ci ha chiamati** (*He called us*) — but it's entirely optional.

Note: **Avere** always conjugates with itself to form the present perfect. Thus, **ho avuto** means *I have had/I had*. The following table shows **avere** conjugated in its entirety.

avere (to have)	
io ho avuto	noi abbiamo avuto
tu hai avuto	voi avete avuto
lui, lei, Lei ha avuto	loro, Loro hanno avuto



Conjugating verbs in the present perfect with *essere*

To conjugate a verb in the present perfect, using **essere** as its helper, you need to take three steps.

1. Form a past participle.

For example, **andare** becomes **andato**, and **partire** becomes **partito**.

2. Conjugate essere in the present tense so it reflects the subject.

For example, **io sono**, **tu sei**, **lei è**, and so on. (Flip to Chapter 2 in Book IV for details.)

3. Put the conjugated form of essere before the past participle, and make the subject and the past participle agree in number and gender.

Lui è andato (*he went*) but **lei è andata** (*she went*). **Noi** (*we* — a mixed group, thus masculine plural) **siamo andati** (*went*). **Noi** (*we* — a group of women) **siamo andate** (*went*).

The following table shows a verb of motion, **andare** (*to go*), conjugated in the present perfect with **essere**.

andare (<i>to go</i>)	
io sono andato/andata	noi siamo andati/andate
tu sei andato/andata	voi siete andati/andate
lui, lei, Lei è andato/andata	loro, Loro sono andati/andate

The conjugated form of **essere** reveals the subject and that determines the gender and number of the past participle. Here are some examples:

È stato a casa. (*He was at home.*)

È partita stamattina. (*She left this morning.*)

Siamo andate a teatro insieme. (*We went to the theater together.*)

Franco e Chiara sono arrivati tardi. (*Franco and Chiara arrived late.*)

The participles' endings tell you that the first subject was a man; the second was a woman; the third, all women; and the fourth, a mixed gender group. For this last example, keep in mind that if you have a mixed group (even one man and 17 women, for example), you use the masculine.

The peculiarities of avere and essere

Both **avere** and **essere** have their own peculiarities. **Avere** wants agreement between participles and direct object pronouns. (If there were ever a reason to be specific, that would be it!) **Essere** wants agreements between participles and subjects. Something the two helping verbs share, however, is the ability to accept a word inserted between the helping verb and the past participle. This makes English speakers who were taught never to split an infinitive (such as *to already know*) nervous. For Italian speakers, the equivalent reaction is evoked when verbs are separated, generally **non posso lo leggere**. This is a mistake that makes Italian speakers cringe!

In this case, though, in a compound tense, you can insert a few little words: **già** (*already*), **appena** (*just*), and **ancora** (*yet*). The following constructions, then, are both normal and acceptable in Italian.

La signora è già partita. (*The lady has already left.*)

Sono appena arrivati. (*They have already arrived.*)

Non hanno ancora parlato con il direttore. (*They haven't yet spoken with the director.*)

Note: Essere always conjugates with itself to form the present perfect. Thus, **sono stato/sono stata** means *I was* (masculine and feminine speakers). The following table shows **essere** conjugated in its entirety.

essere (to be)	
io sono stato/stata	noi siamo stati/state
tu sei stato/stata	voi siete stati/state
lui, lei, Lei è stato/stata	loro, Loro sono stati/state

Over and Done with: The Past Absolute

You use the present perfect (discussed earlier in this chapter) to talk about past (completed) actions. For example:

Giuseppe è arrivato. (*Giuseppe arrived.*)

Maria ha dato dei bei regali. (*Maria gave some beautiful presents.*)

Non sono andati. (*They didn't go.*)

On a related note, you use the past absolute to discuss a completed action from long ago and far away.

Giuseppe arrivò negli Stati Uniti molti anni fa. (*Giuseppe arrived in the United States many years ago.*)

Maria diede dei bei regali. (*Maria gave beautiful presents.*)

Non andarono a scuola. (*They didn't go to school.*)

As you see, the past absolute consists of just one conjugated verb; it's not compound like the present perfect. You conjugate it by adding the appropriate endings to the verb stem (what's left of the verb after you remove the infinitive's ending). For the three types of infinitives, the endings are as shown in Table 1-4.

<i>-are Verbs</i>	<i>-ere Verbs</i>	<i>-ire Verbs</i>
parlare (<i>to talk</i>)	ripetere (<i>to repeat</i>)	dormire (<i>to sleep</i>)
io parlai	io ripetei	io dormii
tu parlasti	tu ripetesti	tu dormisti
lui, lei, Lei parlò	lui, lei, Lei ripetè	lui, lei, Lei dormì
noi parlammo	noi ripetemmo	noi dormimmo
voi parlaste	voi ripeteste	voi dormiste
loro, Loro parlarono	loro, Loro ripeterono	loro, Loro dormirono



The past absolute stem for some verbs is highly irregular. Table 1-5 shows you some of the most common forms.

<i>Verb Infinitive</i>	<i>Stem</i>	<i>Conjugation</i>
avere (<i>to have</i>)	ebb-	ebbi, avesti, ebbe, avemmo, aveste, ebbero
conoscere (<i>to know</i>)	conobb-	conobbi, conoscesti, conobbe, conoscemmo, conosceste, conobbero
dare (<i>to give</i>)	died-	diedi, desti, diede, demmo, deste, dettero (diedero)

<i>Verb Infinitive</i>	<i>Stem</i>	<i>Conjugation</i>
dire (<i>to say; to tell</i>)	diss-	dissi, dicesti, disse, dicemmo, diceste, dissero
essere (<i>to be</i>)	fu-	fui, fosti, fu, fummo, foste, furono
fare (<i>to make; to do</i>)	fec-	feci, facesti, fece, facemmo, faceste, fecero
nascere (<i>to be born</i>)	nacqu-	nacqui, nascesti, nacque, nascemmo, nasceste, nacquero
piacere (<i>to like</i>)	piacqu-	piacqui, piacesti, piacque, piacemmo, piaceste, piacquero
rompere (<i>to break</i>)	rupp-	ruppi, rompesti, ruppe, rompemmo, rompeste, ruppero
sapere (<i>to know</i>)	sepp-	seppi, sapesti, seppe, sapemmo, sapeste, seppero
scrivere (<i>to write</i>)	scriss-	scrissi, scrivesti, scrisse, scrivemmo, scriveste, scrissero
stare (<i>to stay</i>)	stett-	stetti, stesti, stette, stemmo, steste, stettero
vedere (<i>to see</i>)	vid-	vidi, vedesti, vide, vedemmo, vedeste, videro
venire (<i>to come</i>)	venn-	venni, venisti, venne, venimmo, veniste, vennero
vivere (<i>to live</i>)	viss-	vissi, vivesti, visse, vivemmo, viveste, vissero
volere (<i>to want</i>)	voll- (the meaning changes in the past absolute from <i>wants</i> to <i>insists</i>)	volli, volesti, volle, volemmo, voleste, vollero

The past absolute is the literary past, and you're going to find it useful to recognize, if not produce. As for use in everyday speech, the past absolute often gets used in parts of Tuscany and the south of Italy to refer to the not-so-distant past. If you want to see these forms in action, look at the titles of operatic arias: **donna non vidi mai** (*I never saw such a woman*), **vissi d'arte** (*I lived for art*), and **nacqui all'affanno** (*I was born to worry*). Or look at a biography: **Rossini nacque il 29 febbraio nel 1792** (*Rossini was born February 29, 1792*); **morì nel 1868** (*He died in 1868*).

Once Upon a Time: The Imperfect Tense

The imperfect tense is just that — imperfect. In other words, the actions of imperfect verbs aren't perfected, not finished. The imperfect tense sets the stage for what's to come and frequently answers questions like, "What was something or someone like? What did you used to do (habitually, regularly)? What was happening?"

The imperfect tense allows you to use verbs to describe physical and mental states. If someone was rich, poor, tall, short, hungry, thirsty, sleepy, sad, or happy, then you use the imperfect tense to express these conditions.

The imperfect also tells you about things that used to be or that used to happen. For example: *I used to cut school every day. It was a beautiful time. The weather was glorious. Every Sunday they came to dinner. Every Monday we had leftovers.*

You can combine the imperfect with the present perfect to indicate that while one thing was going on (in the imperfect tense), something else happened (in the present perfect). *While I was eating (imperfect), the phone rang (present perfect).*

Other uses of the imperfect include telling what time it was (*it was 3:00 in the morning*), discussing weather conditions (*it was a dark and stormy night*), and reporting indirect discourse (what someone said): *My friend told me (present perfect) that he was (imperfect) unhappy.*

The following sections explain how to form the imperfect and when to use it.

Forming the imperfect

The imperfect tense is the most regular of any of the Italian verb tenses. To form it, you drop only the final two letters (**-re**) from any infinitive, leaving the stem to which you attach subject-specific endings.



Here's the good news: The endings are the same for all the different conjugations. Nothing in Italian could (or ever will) be simpler. See the examples in Table 1-6.

-are Verbs	-ere Verbs	-ire (including isc) Verbs
parlare (<i>to talk; to speak</i>)	scrivere (<i>to write</i>)	dormire (<i>to sleep</i>)
io parlavo	io scrivevo	io dormivo
tu parlavi	tu scrivevi	tu dormivi
lui, lei, Lei parlava	lui, lei, Lei scriveva	lui, lei, Lei dormiva
noi parlavamo	noi scrivevamo	noi dormivamo
voi parlavate	voi scrivevate	voi dormivate
loro, Loro parlavano	loro, Loro scrivevano	loro, Loro dormivano

You can also translate these forms as, for example, *I used to sleep*, or simply, *I slept*.

Of all the Italian verbs, only three are irregular in the imperfect tense. **Essere** (*to be*) is irregular because it's always irregular. Irregularity is in its nature and, no doubt, part of its charm. (**Avere**, which means *to have*, is regular in the imperfect, for a change.) The following table shows you how **essere** conjugates in the imperfect.

essere (<i>to be</i>)	
io ero	noi eravamo
tu eri	voi eravate
lui, lei, Lei era	loro, Loro erano

The other two verbs that are irregular in the imperfect are **dire** (*to tell; to say*) and **fare** (*to make; to do*). Their Latin roots show; their stems, respectively, are **dic-** and **fac-** (from the Latin verbs **dicere** and **facere**). See the following tables for these verb conjugations.

dire (<i>to tell; to say</i>)	
io dicevo	noi dicevamo
tu dicevi	voi dicevate
lui, lei, Lei diceva	loro, Loro dicevano

fare (to make; to do)	
io facevo	noi facevamo
tu facevi	voi facevate
lui, lei, Lei faceva	loro, Loro facevano

Perfecting the use of the imperfect

Certain clues tell you to use the imperfect tense. For example: Adverbial expressions (saying when or how often something happened) include the following:

- ✓ **a volte** (*sometimes*)
- ✓ **di quando in quando** (*sometimes; from time to time*)
- ✓ **ogni giorno** (*every day*)
- ✓ **ogni** (*every*)
- ✓ **mentre** (*while*)
- ✓ **senza sosta** (*without stopping*)
- ✓ **spesso** (*often*)
- ✓ **di solito** (*usually*)

Here are a few sample sentences:

Lui lavorava senza sosta. (*He worked without stopping.*)

Ogni giorno leggevo un po'. (*Every day I read a little bit.*)

Mentre mangiavamo, ascoltavamo l'opera. (*While we were eating, we were listening to the opera.*)

Certain verbs, if you think about their meaning (Did you feel a certain way? What were you thinking, fearing, loving?), also predominantly use the imperfect in the past. They all indicate an ongoing state of mind. A few of these follow:

- ✓ **amare** (*to love*)
- ✓ **credere** (*to believe; to think*)

- ✓ **desiderare** (to want)
- ✓ **odiare** (to hate)
- ✓ **pensare** (to think)
- ✓ **temere** (to fear)
- ✓ **volere** (to want)



Your meaning determines the tense. If, for example, you say that someone gave a party, or in a fairy tale, gave a ball, you use the present perfect: **lui ha organizzato un ballo**. But if he gave parties (for beneficence; to raise funds) for some purpose, then use the imperfect: **lui organizzava balli [di beneficenza; per raccogliere fondi]**. However, all the physical and emotional states of being introduced with **avere** and **essere** are likely to appear in the imperfect tense (as opposed to the present perfect).

Adding Nuance to Meaning with Verb Tense

La sfumatura (*nuance*) is an art historical term that refers to shading. Choice of verb tenses allows you to add nuance to your Italian. Not all verbs undergo changes in meaning, but those that do can lend precision to your language.

Pensare (to think) doesn't change meaning. **Ho pensato** (*I had a thought*), in the present perfect, and **pensavo** (*I was thinking*), in the imperfect, essentially mean the same thing.

The prepositions that follow **pensare**, however, do modify the meaning to some degree. **Pensare a** means *to think about*, and you can express it as **ci penso** (*I'm thinking about it*); this phrase can be useful when confronted with an overzealous store clerk. **Pensare di**, on the other hand, means *to intend to*. **Non pensavo di interrompere** (*I didn't intend to interrupt*).

Five other verbs have more definite changes in meaning, depending on the tense you use. See Table 1-7 for these verbs' subtleties of meaning.

Table 1-7 Verbal Nuance with Tenses			
<i>Infinitive</i>	<i>Present Indicative</i>	<i>Imperfect</i>	<i>Present Perfect</i>
conoscere (<i>to know; to know someone; to be acquainted with someone or with a place</i>)	conosco (<i>I know</i>)	conoscevo (<i>I knew; I was acquainted with</i>)	ho conosciuto (<i>I met [someone]</i>)
sapere (<i>to know; to have know-how; to be aware of something</i>)	so (<i>I know</i>)	sapevo (<i>I knew [how to]; I was aware of</i>)	ho saputo (<i>I found out</i>)
dovere (<i>to have to</i>)	devo (<i>I have to</i>)	dovevo (<i>I was supposed to</i>)	ho dovuto (<i>I had to</i>)
potere (<i>to be able to; can</i>)	posso (<i>I can</i>)	potevo (<i>I was able to</i>)	ho potuto (<i>I managed</i>)
volare (<i>to want</i>)	voglio (<i>I want/ would like</i>)	volevo (<i>I wanted; I intended to; I meant to</i>)	ho voluto (<i>I wanted [and more or less insisted]</i>)

Some of these changes are slight, but they allow you to achieve a certain specificity of language. Probably the most important changes are in **conoscere**, **sapere**, and **dovere**.

La madre di Marco? Non la conoscevo ma l'ho conosciuta ieri. (*Marco's mother? I didn't know her but met her yesterday.*)

Sapeva usare il cambio manuale. (*She/he knew how to use manual transmissions.*)

Dovevo studiare, ma non ne avevo voglia. (*I was supposed to study, but I didn't feel like it.*) Compare this with **Ho dovuto studiare per l'esame.** (*I had to study for the exam.*)



A side effect of using the imperfect involves manners. It's simply more polite to say that you wanted to see someone (**volevo vedere il dottore**) than to say that you want to see someone. Consider the English counterparts. *I want to see the doctor. I wanted to see the doctor.* The second sentence is less brusque. The same holds true for the Italian.