

-았/었-

past tense

Slots into the verb before the final ending. The vowel is chosen exactly as in -아요/어요, so learning one teaches you the other.

How it attaches

Stem type	Form	Example
Last vowel ㅏ or ㅑ	-았-	살다 → 살았어요
Identical vowel merges	-았- absorbed	가다 → 갔어요
Any other vowel	-었-	먹다 → 먹었어요
하다 verbs	했	공부하다 → 공부했어요
With the formal ending	-았/었습니다	먹었습니다
이다	이었어요 / 였어요	학생이었어요 / 친구였어요

Notes

-았/었- is an infix: it sits between the stem and whatever ending comes next. 먹 + 았 + 어요 gives 먹었어요; with the formal ending it gives 먹었습니다. Every ending you already know can follow it.

The vowel rule is identical to the polite present. Last stem vowel ㅏ or ㅑ takes 았; anything else takes 었; 하다 becomes 했. The same merges happen too: 가 + 았 collapses to 갔, 보 + 았 becomes 봤, 마시 + 었 becomes 마셨.

One difference from English is worth flagging early. Korean uses the past for states that began earlier and still hold: 결혼했어요 means "I am married," not only "I got married." The same goes for 앉았어요 (I am seated) and 닮았어요 (we look alike).

Examples

- 1 어제 친구를 만났어요.
I met a friend yesterday.
- 2 아침에 밥을 안 먹었어요.
I didn't eat breakfast this morning.
- 3 언니는 작년에 결혼했어요.
My older sister got married last year.
- 4 그 사람은 아버지를 닮았어요.
He takes after his father.
- 5 학생이었을 때 자주 갔어요.
I used to go there often when I was a student.
- 6 지금 막 도착했습니다.
I've just arrived.

Compared with

-고 있었다

-았/었- states that something happened; -고 있었다 says it was in progress at a particular moment. English "was doing" needs the second.

숙제를 했어요. (did the homework) / 숙제를 하고 있었어요. (was doing the homework)

-았/었었-

Doubling it pushes the event further back and cuts it off from now — a state that used to hold and no longer does.

서울에 살았어요. (I lived in Seoul) / 서울에 살았었어요. (I used to live in Seoul, but not any more)

Resulting states

Several Korean verbs use the past where English uses the present, because the action produced a state that continues.

앉았어요. (I'm seated) / 닮았어요. (they look alike)

Watch out

✗ 어제 학교에 가았어요.

○ 어제 학교에 갔어요.

The stem already ends in ㅏ, so the 았 merges into it. 사다 → 샀어요 and 만나다 → 만났어요 work the same way.

✗ 한국어를 공부하였어요.

○ 한국어를 공부했어요.

하다 becomes 했 in the past, never 하였. Every 하다 compound follows: 일했어요, 운동했어요, 사랑했어요.

✗ 어제 친구를 만나요.

○ 어제 친구를 만났어요.

A time word like 어제 does not make the verb past on its own. Korean marks tense on the verb, every time.