Was vs. Were: What's the Difference?

Was and *were* are both past tenses of the verb *to be*. The verb *be* is a tricky one because it is an irregular verb and one that we find ourselves using with great frequency, so it is that much more important that we choose the correct verb for our sentences.

In this post, I want to go over the grammar behind was vs. were, when it's correct to use which one, and give you a few tips to keep track of them both. After reading this post, you shouldn't have any trouble correctly choosing between was or were in your future writing.

Forms of Was and Were

66 Was and were are
both in the past tense. **99**

As I said above, *was* and *were* are in the past tense, but they are used differently.

Was is used in the **first person singular** (I) and the **third person singular** (he, she, it).

Were is used in the **second person singular and plural** (you, your, yours) and **first and third person plural** (we, they).

The forms that *was* and *were* will take in your sentence are summarized in the chart below,

Singular = I was, You were, He was, She was, It was

Plural = We were, You were, They were

- I was driving to the park.

- You were drinking some water.

- He was about to eat dinner.

- She was at the roller rink.

- It was a great time.

- We were in the right spot.

- They were nowhere to be seen.

If I was vs. If I were

While some people get mixed up on what we've covered above, most of the confusion with these two words centers on the use of the subjunctive mood and specifically the two phrases *if I was* vs. *if I were*. For example, which of the following two choices is correct?

- If I was a better cook, I could entertain more.

-or-

- If I were a better cook, I could entertain more.

You hear people say both each and every day, so it's hard to know which is correct. The answer, however, has to do with the subjunctive mood.

Subjunctive Mood

**The subjunctive mood
is for hypotheticals.**

The subjunctive mood is a verb form that is used for unreal or hypothetical statements. It is made up of the phrases *I were*, *he were*, *she were*, *it were*, etc. You often use this form when you are being wishful. For example,

- I wish I weren't so shy.

- I wish it were warmer outside.

- If I were taller, I could dunk a basketball.

- If John were a rich man, he could drive a fancy car.

- He acts as if he were the one in charge.

- John spends money as if he were a millionaire.

All of the above sentences use the verb *were* because they aren't true; they do not describe reality.

In the first two sentences, I am talking about things I wish would happen.

In the third and fourth sentences, I am talking about situations that would happen if I were taller and if John were rich, speaking hypothetically.

And the fifth and sixth sentences are examples of unreal statements.

When to Use Were

Another good example of the subjunctive mood can be found in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. In the song, "If I were a rich man," the character Tevye sings about how different his life would be and all the things he would do if he were rich.

If I were a rich man, I'd build a big tall house…

If I were a rich man, I'd have the time that I lack.

If I were a wealthy man, I wouldn't have to work hard.

In these lines, Tevye is fantasizing about life as a wealthy man. He isn't rich now; he's just imagining it, so we need to use the subjective "If I were," not "If I was."

The correct answer for the example above, therefore, is, "If I were a better cook, I could entertain more."

Tricks to Remember

Two good clues for the subjunctive mood are the words *if* and *wish*. If you see either of these words, there is a good chance you will need to use the subjunctive.

When to Use Was

Since *were* is used for statements that do not describe reality, *was* is just the opposite. *Was* is used for statements of fact. For example,

- Last night, I was watching TV until midnight.

- When I was younger, I wanted to be a singer.

- Your brother was my college roommate.

Summary

These words are used differently in sentences, so it's important to know when to use were vs. was.

Was is used in the first and third person singular past. It is used for statements of fact.

Were is used in the second person singular and plural and first and third person plural. It is used in the subjunctive mood to indicate unreal or hypothetical statements. The words *if* and *wish* usually indicate the subjunctive mood.