Talking About the Past in Swedish

Swedish Lesson

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Video transcript

Hey there and welcome to Ablas! In this video, we'll learn how to talk about the past in Swedish, including how to ask questions, with an example story and quiz to test your knowledge at the end. You can download a PDF of today's lesson from the link in the description!

Regular verbs

Let's start off simple with the regular verbs.

The good news is that Swedish verbs don't change depending on who you're talking about. Take the verb prata, meaning "to talk". In the past tense, it's the same for everyone: jag pratade, du pratade, han pratade, hon pratade, vi pratade, ni pratade, de pratade.

	talked
I...	jag pratade
You... (singular)	du pratade
He/she...	han/hon pratade
We...	vi pratade
You... (plural)	ni pratade
They...	de pratade

To talk about the past, you need to know three forms of each verb. Let's take prata as an example.

- First, the infinitive, which is the dictionary form: prata.
- Next is the past tense, which is called the preteritum: pratade.
- And finally, the supine: pratat. We'll use the supine a bit later on with the verbs har and hade.

Regular Swedish verbs fall into three groups, and the present tense ending tells you which group a verb belongs to. Take a moment now to look at the table before we step into a few examples.

	Present	**Past**	**Supine**
Group 1	-ar	-ade	-at
Group 2	-er	-de / -te	-t
Group 3	-r	-dde	-tt

Let's look at an example from each group. Prata is a group 1 verb, so we get pratade in the past, and pratat in the supine.

Ringa, to call, is in group 2, which leaves us with ringde and ringt. But köpa, to buy, uses a different ending: köpte and köpt. This happens when the verb stem ends in K, P, S, T or X.

And lastly, bo, to live, is a group 3 verb, so we use bodde and bott.

	Infinitive	**Past**	**Supine**
Group 1	prata (to talk)	pratade	pratat
Group 2	ringa (to call)	ringde	ringt
Group 2	köpa (to buy)	köpte	köpt
Group 3	bo (to live)	bodde	bott

Let's see these verbs in some sentences.

- Jag pratade med min kompis. (I talked to my friend.)
- Hon ringde mig igår. (She called me yesterday.)
- Vi köpte bröd. (We bought bread.)

- De bodde i Malmö. (They lived in Malmö.)

Irregular verbs

We've covered the regular verbs, so let's look at the verbs that don't follow these patterns.

The last group is group 4, which is where all the irregular verbs live. These verbs change their stem vowel in the past tense instead of adding an ending. For example, skriva, to write, becomes skrev, meaning "wrote" in the past tense. And the supine becomes skrivit. There's no pattern to follow, so the best thing to do is learn all three forms of each verb together.

Here are some of the most common irregular verbs.

To be: vara, var, varit. To have: ha, hade, haft. To go: gå, gick, gått. To come: komma, kom, kommit. To do: göra, gjorde, gjort. To see: se, såg, sett. And to say: säga, sa, sagt.

Infinitive	Past	Supine
vara (to be)	var	varit
ha (to have)	hade	haft
gå (to go)	gick	gått
komma (to come)	kom	kommit
göra (to do)	gjorde	gjort
se (to see)	såg	sett
säga (to say)	sa	sagt

Before we go any further, let's look at a few of these verbs in sentences.

- Hon gick till parken. (She went to the park.)

- De kom hem sent. (They came home late.)
- Jag såg filmen igår. (I saw the film yesterday.)
- Vi var i Stockholm. (We were in Stockholm.)

Choosing the tense

Now we know the verb forms, let's look at how to use them. Swedish has three main ways of talking about the past, so let's see how to choose between them.

First up is the simple past or preteritum. We use it for something that finished at a specific time in the past, so it's the tense you'll use most often when telling a story. Notice that both of the following examples tell us exactly when something happened.

- Jag åt frukost klockan sju. (I ate breakfast at seven o'clock.)
- Hon ringde mig i måndags. (She called me last Monday.)

Next is the perfect tense. We make it with the verb har, meaning "have", followed by the supine. We use it when we don't say exactly when something happened, or when it's still relevant now. Remember, har is the same for everyone, and the supine never changes.

- Jag har ätit. (I have eaten.)
- Jag har bott här i tre år. (I've lived here for three years.)

And finally, there's the pluperfect, which we use for something that had already happened before another moment in the past. We make it with hade, the past tense of "have", followed by the supine.

- Jag hade redan ätit när hon kom. (I had already eaten when she came.)
- Vi hade gått innan det började regna. (We had gone before it started to rain.)

There's one important rule to remember. If you say exactly when something happened, like yesterday, you need the simple past instead of the perfect tense. So we can't say: "jag har ätit pizza igår." Instead, we say: "jag åt pizza igår." It's the same in English, where we wouldn't say "I have eaten pizza yesterday".

Questions and negatives

Now we'll cover how to ask questions and make negative statements about the past.

To ask a question about the past, we simply swap the verb and the subject.

- If we start with: "du åt frukost," meaning "you ate breakfast", we can turn it into a question like this: "åt du frukost?"
- For the perfect and pluperfect, har or hade moves to the front. Har du ätit? (Have you eaten?) Hade du ätit? (Had you eaten?)

So how do we write negative statements in the past tense? We use the word inte, meaning "not".

- In the simple past, inte goes straight after the verb. Jag åt inte frukost. (I didn't eat breakfast.)
- With har and hade, inte goes between the helping verb and the supine. Jag har inte ätit. (I haven't eaten.) Jag hade inte ätit. (I hadn't eaten.)

Story

Now that we've learnt how to talk about the past in Swedish, let's put it into practice with a short story.

English	Swedish
Det var en solig lördag i Göteborg.	It was a sunny Saturday in Gothenburg.
Elias och Freja åkte till en liten ö med färjan.	Elias and Freja went to a small island by ferry.
De kom fram klockan tio och började gå längs stranden.	They arrived at ten o'clock and started to walk along the beach.
Freja badade, men Elias badade inte eftersom vattnet var kallt.	Freja went for a swim, but Elias didn't because the water was cold.

English	Swedish
De åt smörgåsar och drack kaffe på en klippa.	They ate sandwiches and drank coffee on a rock.
Elias hade glömt kameran hemma, så han tog bilder med telefonen.	Elias had forgotten the camera at home, so he took pictures with his phone.
“Har du varit här förut?” frågade Elias.	“Have you been here before?” asked Elias.
“Nej, jag har inte varit här förut, men det är jättefint!” sa Freja.	“No, I haven’t been here before, but it’s really lovely!” said Freja.
På kvällen åkte de hem, trötta men glada.	In the evening they went home, tired but happy.

It’s quiz time!

Don’t worry if you missed some of the past tense examples in that story – you can download the PDF of today’s lesson which will include the full translation. But now it’s quiz time!

How do you say “I went”?

A. Jag gick

B. Jag går

C. Jag gått

The correct answer is... Jag gick. The word gått is the supine, so it would need har in front of it.

Which sentence is correct?

A. Jag åt igår.

B. Jag har ätit igår.

The correct answer is... Jag åt igår. Because igår tells us exactly when it happened, we need the simple past.

Which sentence means “I hadn’t seen it”?

A. Jag såg inte det.

B. Jag hade inte sett det.

C. Jag har inte sett det.

The correct answer is... Jag hade inte sett det. We need hade, the past tense of “have”, to make the pluperfect.

Your task

Well done for getting this far!

Now your task is to write a short diary entry about your last weekend in Swedish. Try to include where you went, what you ate, and a sentence using har or hade.

Be sure to leave a like if you enjoyed this lesson and hit the subscribe button so you don’t miss out on future videos. Our website is full of fun games across 7 languages, so head on over and put your skills to the test! Until next time, thanks for watching!