THE IMPERFECT SUBJUNCTIVE

Pattern: The imperfect subjunctive is the past tense in the subjunctive mood.

Forming the imperfect subjunctive
There are two steps to forming the imperfect subjunctive:

Step 1: Getting the stem
To form the imperfect subjunctive, start with the third-person plural (“ellos/ellas”) preterit form. Then we remove the -on ending. We are left with the stem. Let's take the verb hablar for example. The third-person plural preterit form is hablaron. After removing the -on, we are left with the stem hablar-. If the verb is comer, then we start with comieron and after removing the -on, we are left with comier- as the stem.

Step 2: Adding the endings.
The imperfect subjunctive endings are the same for all verbs:

- -a, -as, -a, -amos, -ais, -an

Here are the full conjugations of hablar and comer in the imperfect subjunctive:

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<th>HABLAR</th>
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Note: The nosotros forms have a written accent to preserve the stress on the same syllable as the other forms.

When to use the imperfect subjunctive
The imperfect subjunctive is used in the same situations as the present subjunctive (uncertainty, etc). The only difference is that the action in question is in the past. For example:

Dudábamos que ella dijera la verdad. We doubted that she was telling the truth.
Era importante que lo hiciéramos. It was important for them to do it.
Me alegraba que se fuera. I was glad he went away.

A common construction
The conditional tense is technically a past tense. This is important to understand because many hypothetical situations require the use of both tenses. For example:

Si yo fuera rico, no trabajaría. If I were rich, I would not work.

Since the speaker is not rich, the subjunctive is used to describe a situation that is contrary to reality. In cases like this, the imperfect subjunctive and the conditional go hand-in-hand. Interestingly, this is one of the few situations where English also uses the subjunctive mood; the correct past tense would be “I was...”, but the subjunctive “I were...” is used.

Here is another example of the conditional and imperfect subjunctive working together:
Tú comprarías un Ferrari si tuvieras mucho dinero.
You would buy a Ferrari if you had a lot of money.

A rare alternative
There is an alternative set of endings for imperfect subjunctive verbs. Rather than ending in -ra, -ras, -ramos, etc, these verbs end in -se, -ses, -semos etc. For example:

Yo quería que le escribieras una carta. I wanted you to write her a letter.
Yo quería que le escribieses una carta. I wanted you to write her a letter.

The two different endings are generally equivalent and interchangeable. However, the -se endings are much less common. It is best to use the -ra endings because they will always be acceptable.