

Online French courses

level A1 to C1

How to use the *passé composé* in French

1. The past tenses in French

French has several past tenses, including the *passé composé*, *imparfait*, *passé simple*, *plus-que-parfait* and *passé antérieur*. They do not necessarily correspond directly to English past tenses.

The *passé composé* can correspond to different English forms depending on context:

- *J'ai mangé.* → I ate.
- *J'ai mangé.* → I did eat.
- *J'ai mangé.* → I have eaten.

The context determines the appropriate interpretation.

2. How to build the *passé composé*

The *passé composé* consists of:

present tense of *être* or *avoir* + past participle

Examples:

- *J'ai beaucoup couru le mois dernier.* → I ran a lot last month.
- *Elle est venue tard.* → She came late.
- *Il a dormi ici la semaine dernière.* → He slept here last week.
- *Sont-ils déjà arrivés ?* → Have they arrived yet?
- *Tu n'as pas encore essayé.* → You haven't tried yet.
- *Il n'est pas parti hier.* → He didn't leave yesterday.

The two key questions are:

1. What is the past participle?
2. Should the auxiliary be *être* or *avoir*?

3. Forming the past participle

Verbs ending in *-er*

Most first-group verbs ending in *-er* form their past participle by replacing *-er* with *-é*.

- *manger* (to eat) → *mangé*

Most verbs ending in *-ir*

Many verbs ending in *-ir* form their past participle with *-i*.

- *dormir* (to sleep) → *dormi*

Irregular verbs ending in *-ir*

Some *-ir* verbs have irregular past participles:

- *courir* (to run) → *couru*
- *venir* (to come) → *venu*
- *tenir* (to hold) → *tenu*
- *vêtir* (to dress) → *vêtu*
- *mourir* (to die) → *mort*
- *offrir* (to offer) → *offert*
- *souffrir* (to suffer) → *souffert*
- *acquérir* (to acquire) → *acquis*

Related verbs generally follow the same pattern:

- *revenir* (to come back) → *revenu*
- *détenir* (to possess) → *détenu*
- *retenir* (to retain) → *retenu*
- *dévêtir* (to undress) → *dévêtu*

Most verbs ending in *-re*

Many verbs ending in *-re* take *-u* in the past participle:

- *entendre* (to hear) → *entendu*

Some are irregular and take *-is*:

- *prendre* (to take) → *pris*
- *apprendre* (to learn) → *appris*
- *mettre* (to put) → *mis*

Verbs ending in *-ire*

These generally take *-it*:

- *dire* (to say) → *dit*
- *écrire* (to write) → *écrit*
- *construire* (to build) → *construit*

- *conduire* (to drive) → *conduit*

There are many irregular past participles, so they often need to be memorised individually.

4. Choosing *être* or *avoir*

General rule

You have to make the following basic distinction:

- Verbs expressing **movement from one place to another** or a **state/change of state** are generally conjugated with *être*.
- Other verbs are generally conjugated with *avoir*.
- Another useful test is whether the verb has a **direct object (COD)**. A direct object answers *what?* or *who?* in relation to the verb and generally leads to the use of *avoir*.

Examples:

- *J'ai pris le train tous les jours.* → I took the train every day.
Le train is the direct object: What did I take? The train.
- *J'ai vu l'enfant devant la fenêtre.* → I saw the child in front of the window.
L'enfant is the direct object: Who did I see? The child.
- *Je suis monté dans la chambre.* → I went up to the room.
Monter expresses movement, so *être* is used.
- *Nous sommes devenus riches.* → We became rich.
Devenir expresses a change of state, so *être* is used.

Reflexive verbs

Reflexive verbs, identified by *se*, use *être* in the *passé composé*.

Examples:

- *Je me suis levé à sept heures.* → I got up at seven o'clock.
- *Tu t'es rappelé ton voyage.* → You remembered your trip.
- *Nous nous sommes regardés.* → We looked at each other.

Verbs that can use either auxiliary

Some verbs can take either *être* or *avoir*, with a change in meaning.

For example:

- *Tu es descendu de la colline hier matin.* → You came down the hill yesterday morning.
- *Tu as descendu le vélo du grenier.* → You took the bike down from the attic.

With *être*, *descendre* expresses movement. With *avoir*, the thing being moved (*le vélo*) is the direct object.

5. Agreement of the past participle

There are three main cases.

A. With *être*

The past participle agrees with the **subject**.

Subject	Ending	Example
masculine singular	no change	<i>Je suis parti.</i> → I left.
feminine singular	-e	<i>Je suis partie.</i> → I left.
masculine plural	-s	<i>Les éléphants sont fatigués.</i> → The elephants are tired.
feminine plural	-es	<i>Les voitures sont garées.</i> → The cars are parked.

B. With *avoir*

The basic rule is that the past participle **does not agree with the subject**.

- *Les filles ont gagné.* → The girls won.
- *Elle a regardé la télévision.* → She watched TV.
- *Les éléphants ont mangé.* → The elephants ate.

Exception: a COD before the verb

When a direct object (COD) comes **before** the verb, the past participle agrees with that COD.

Compare:

- *Ils ont vu les oiseaux.* → They saw the birds.
The COD (*les oiseaux*) comes after the verb, so *vu* does not change.

- *Les oiseaux qu'ils ont vus...* → The birds that they saw...
The COD (*les oiseaux*) comes before the verb, so *vu* agrees: *vus*.
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C. With reflexive verbs

Reflexive verbs use *être*, but agreement depends on the grammatical role of the reflexive pronoun.

Case 1: the reflexive pronoun is the COD

- *Elle s'est lavée.* → She washed herself.

Here, *s'* is the direct object and comes before the verb, so the participle agrees with *elle*: *lavée*.

A useful test is to remove *se* and ask whether the verb normally takes a direct object:

- *laver quelque chose* → to wash something
- *laver quelqu'un* → to wash somebody

Therefore, in *se laver*, *se* can function as the COD.

Case 2: the reflexive pronoun is an indirect object

- *Elle s'est lavé les mains.* → She washed her hands.

Here, *les mains* is the COD, while *s'* is an indirect object. Since the COD comes after the verb, there is no agreement: *lavé*.

Case 3: the COD comes before the verb

- *Les mains qu'elle s'est lavées plus tôt sont de nouveau sales.*
→ The hands that she washed earlier are dirty again.

Les mains is the COD and comes before the verb, so the past participle agrees: *lavées*.

6. When to use the *passé composé*

A. A single action or event in the past

The *passé composé* is normally used for a completed action or event in the past.

- *J'ai gagné la course.* → I won the race.
- *L'année dernière, j'ai étudié le français.* → Last year, I studied French.
- *Je suis allée à Bordeaux il y a trois semaines.* → I went to Bordeaux three weeks ago.

B. A past action with a visible or relevant result in the present

- *Je suis né en 1984.* → I was born in 1984.
- *J'ai appris le français à Paris.* → I learned French in Paris.

The course presents these examples as situations where the past event has a continuing relevance in the present.

C. A chronological sequence of past events

The *passé composé* can describe a series of completed events in chronological order.

- *La semaine dernière, Pierre est allé à Strasbourg. Il a fait des courses. Vers 20 heures, il est rentré.*
→ Last week, Pierre went to Strasbourg. He did some shopping. Around 8 p.m., he returned home.

This use is common in narratives, reports and accounts of past events.

To understand when the *passé composé* should **not** be used, it is important to study the *imparfait* alongside it.

7. Main irregular past participles

Verb	Meaning	Past participle
<i>avoir</i>	to have	<i>eu</i>
<i>boire</i>	to drink	<i>bu</i>
<i>connaître</i>	to know	<i>connu</i>
<i>croire</i>	to believe	<i>cru</i>
<i>devoir</i>	to have to / must / to owe	<i>dû</i>
<i>lire</i>	to read	<i>lu</i>
<i>pleuvoir</i>	to rain	<i>plu</i>
<i>pouvoir</i>	can / to be able to	<i>pu</i>
<i>recevoir</i>	to receive	<i>reçu</i>
<i>savoir</i>	to know	<i>su</i>
<i>voir</i>	to see	<i>vu</i>

<i>vouloir</i>	to want	<i>voulu</i>
<i>mettre</i>	to put	<i>mis</i>
<i>prendre</i>	to take	<i>pris</i>
<i>conduire</i>	to drive	<i>conduit</i>
<i>dire</i>	to say	<i>dit</i>
<i>écrire</i>	to write	<i>écrit</i>
<i>être</i>	to be	<i>été</i>
<i>faire</i>	to do / to make	<i>fait</i>
<i>offrir</i>	to offer	<i>offert</i>
<i>ouvrir</i>	to open	<i>ouvert</i>