

## Online French courses

level A1 to C1

### How to use the *passé composé* in French

#### The past tenses in French

The different past tenses in French do not necessarily correspond to the English past tenses. Among them, we find the *passé composé*, the *imparfait*, the *passé simple*, the *plus-que-parfait*, the *passé antérieur*... This module focuses only on the *passé composé*, for the other tenses, just have a look at the corresponding modules!

So, let's start. The *passé composé* can be translated in three different ways :

I ate = *j'ai mangé*

I did eat = *j'ai mangé*

I have eaten = *j'ai mangé*

The context will tell you how *j'ai mangé* is to be understood.

#### How to build the *passé composé* ?

You need two elements : *être* (to be) or *avoir* (to have) conjugated in the present tense + the past participle of the verb :

I ran a lot last month = *j'ai beaucoup couru le mois dernier* (*ai* + *couru*)

she came late = *elle est venue tard* (*est* + *venue*)

did he sleep here last week = *Il a dormi ici la semaine dernière?* (*a* + *dormi*)

Have they arrived yet = *sont-ils déjà arrivés?* (*sont* + *arrivés*)

You haven't tried yet = *tu n'as pas encore essayé.* (*as* + *essayé*)

He didn't leave yesterday = *il n'est pas parti hier* (*est* + *parti*)

So the two questions are :

What is the past participle of the verb?

How do we know if it's to be (*être*) or to have (*avoir*)?

Let's start with the past participle!

#### How to form the past participle ?

Some verbs follow a pattern and thus, the past participle can be easily found:

- Verbs of the 1st group (ending with *-er*) will take *"-é"* instead of *"-er"*:

Let's take *manger* (to eat). First, you remove "-er". You have "*mang*". Then add "-é" and you have the past participle *mangé*

- Most verbs ending in "-ir" will take "-i" instead of "-ir" at the end:

Let's try with *dormir* (to sleep). Just remove "-r" and you have the past participle *dormi*

- Irregular verbs ending in "-ir"

Unfortunately, not all the verbs ending with "-ir" will follow this pattern.

Some will have "-u" instead of "-ir", like *courir* (to run) which gives *couru*, *venir* (to come) *venu*, *tenir* (to hold) *tenu*, *vêtir* (to dress) *vêtu* + all similar verbs like *revenir* (to come back), *détenir* (to possess), *retenir* (to retain), *dévêtir* (to undress) etc.

*mourir* (to die) will have *mort* as past participle

*offrir* (to offer) and *souffrir* (to suffer) will respectively have *offert* and *souffert* as past participles

*acquérir* (to acquire) will have *acquis* as past participle

- Most verbs ending in "-re" will take "-u" instead of "-re":

Let's do it with *entendre* (to hear). Remove "-re" and you have "*entend*", then add "-u" and you have the past participle *entendu*

Again, there are some exceptions. Some will have "-is" at the end of the past participle, like *prendre* (to take) *pris*, *apprendre* (to learn) *appris*, *mettre* (to put) *mis*

- Verbs ending with "-ire" will have "-it":

*dire* (to say) *dit*, *écrire* (to write) *écrit*, *construire* (to build) *construit*, *conduire* (to drive) *conduit*

All the patterns mentioned above can help you guess the past participle of the verb, but unfortunately there are lots of irregular verbs and their past participles just have to be learnt by heart like the irregular verbs in English. You'll find a list of the most common verbs at the end of this module.

Now let's focus on the auxiliary verbs, *être* and *avoir*.

### ***être* or *avoir* in the passé composé?**

The basic rule says that verbs referring to movement (meaning that there is an actual movement from one place to another) or state will be conjugated with *être*, whereas the other verbs will be conjugated with *avoir*. We could also explain it this way: when a verb has a direct object, its passé composé is with *avoir*. To find if there is a direct object, you can simply ask the question what? or who? referring to the verb.

*J'ai pris le train tous les jours* (I took the train every day) = *J'ai pris quoi?* Answer "*le train*". *le train* is the direct object (What did I take? the train). Therefore we have *avoir*.

*J'ai vu l'enfant devant la fenêtre* (I saw the child in front of the window) = *Je vois qui?* Answer "*l'enfant*". *l'enfant* is the direct object. (Who did I see? The child.) Therefore we have *avoir*.

*Je suis monté dans la chambre* (I went up to the room) = Here we have a verb indicating a movement, therefore we have *être*. Moreover, we can't ask *je suis monté qui ou quoi?* (I went up who or what? does not make sense). So there is no possible direct object.

*Nous sommes devenus riches* (we became rich) = The verb indicates a state, "rich", so it is conjugated with *être*.

The *passé composé* of reflexive verbs is always with *être*. Reflexive verbs are verbs built with the particle "se": *se regarder* (to look at each other), *se rappeler* (to remember), *se réveiller* (to wake up), *se lever* (to get up) etc.

*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.

**Be careful!** Some verbs can be conjugated with either *être* or *avoir*. Depending on the auxiliary, they will have a different meaning.

Let's take *descendre*. *Tu es descendu de la colline hier matin.* = You came down the hill last morning. (*descendre* indicates a movement, "to come down", and is therefore conjugated with *être*.)

*Tu as descendu le vélo du grenier.* = You took the bike down from the attic.

(here we have *descendre quelque chose* "to take something down" The bike is the direct object. Therefore *avoir*)

### **Agreements in the *passé composé***

Now that you know how to build the *passé composé* in French, let's turn our attention to the agreement of the *participe passé* (past participle). You may have noticed in the examples above, that the endings (the agreement) of the *participe passé* can vary. Sometimes it is just "-é", sometimes "-és" or "-ées", "i", "ie", "ies" etc.

You have to distinguish three cases :

#### agreement of the *participe passé* with *être*

With *être* as auxiliary verb, the *participe passé* will agree with the subject of the verb. It means that if the subject is feminine, the *participe passé* will add "-e" at the end, if the subject is plural it will add "-s", and if it is feminine and plural it will add "-es". With

a masculine and singular subject, the *participe passé* stays unchanged. Let's see a few examples:

*Je suis parti.* = I left (the subject "je" is masculine, because *parti* is unchanged.)

*Je suis partie.* = I left (the subject "je" is feminine because there is a "-e" at the end of *partie*.)

*Les voitures sont garées.* = The cars are parked (*voitures* is feminine and plural, so *garé* takes -es = *garées*)

*Les éléphants sont fatigués.* = The elephants are tired. (*éléphants* is masculine and plural, so *fatigué* takes -s = *fatigués*)

#### agreement of the *participe passé* with *avoir*

With *avoir* as auxiliary verb, the fundamental rule is that the *participe passé* stays unchanged, regardless of the subject:

*Les filles ont gagné* = The girls won

*Elle a regardé la télévisio.* = She watched TV.

*Les éléphants ont mangé* = The elephants ate.

However, there is one particular case which changes everything. When the COD (direct object of the sentence, which answers to who? or what? referring to the verb) is placed before the verb, then the *participe passé* will agree with this COD:  
*Ils ont vu les oiseaux.* = They saw the birds. The COD is "*les oiseaux*". It comes after the verb "*ont vu*", therefore it has no influence on the rule and *vu* doesn't change.  
*Les oiseaux qu'ils ont vus...* = The birds which they saw... The COD is still "*les oiseaux*", but this time it comes before the verb "*ont vus*". It means that the *participe passé* will agree with this COD. *Les oiseaux* is masculine and plural, therefore *vu* becomes *vus*.

#### agreement of the *participe passé* with reflexive verbs.

As we have already seen earlier, reflexive verbs are verbs built with the particle "se" and are conjugated in the *passé composé* with *être*. However, when using a reflexive verb (se regarder, se laver, se rappeler etc...) in compound tenses like the *passé composé*, what is the ending of the past participle? They are conjugated with *être* in the *passé composé*, so the *participe passé* should agree with the subject, right? Well... It depends.

Here you must distinguish three cases:

- Example 1: *Elle s'est lavée.* (She washed herself)

In this example, the reflexive pronoun *s'* is actually the direct object of the verb and

refers to the subject itself (she washed herself). Since the direct object precedes the verb, the *participe passé* agrees with it:

→ *lavée* (the *COD* and the subject are the same : *elle*)

Tipps: there is an easy way to know if *se, me, te, nous* etc... is *COD* or not. You take the verb without *se*, and see if it is conjugated with a *COD* or not. In French, it is always *laver quelque chose* or *laver quelqu'un*. (to wash something or somebody). You can't just say *je lave*, or the person you are talking to is certain to ask you *Tu laves quoi?* (you're washing what?). Therefore, *laver* always has a *COD* and *se, me, te, nous* etc. will be *COD* in *se laver*.

- Example 2: *Elle s'est lavé les mains*. (She washed her hands)

Here, *les mains* is the direct object of the verb, while *s'* functions as an indirect object (*elle a lavé les mains à qui?*) Since the direct object comes after the verb, there is no agreement:

→ *lavé*

- Example 3: *Les mains qu'elle s'est lavées plus tôt sont de nouveau sales*. (The hands, which she washed earlier, are dirty again)

Here, the direct object *les mains* is placed before the verb (introduced by *que*), and *s'* is still indirect object. Therefore, the past participle agrees with the *COD*:

→ *lavées* (*les mains* is feminine and plural)

### **When to use the *passé composé*?**

Now that you know how to build the *passé composé*, let's see when to use it and what it means. In French, there are several tenses associated with the past (*passé simple, imparfait, plus-que-parfait* etc.), and the *passé composé* is limited to certain contexts.

#### Single action or event in the past

When you want to talk about an action or an event which happened in the past, you usually use the *passé composé* :

*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.

#### Single action or event in the past with visible results in the present

*Je suis né en 1984* = I'm born in 1984 (and still alive)

*J'ai appris le français à Paris.* = I learnt English in Paris (and that's why I can speak French today)

#### Chain of events in the past 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 8:00 p.m., he returned home.

This last example is typical of narratives in the past (reports of past events, short stories, novels etc.). In order to fully understand the *passé composé*, it is necessary to go through the module *L'imparfait*, especially to know the contexts in the past where *passé composé* can't be used.

### **List of the main irregular *participes passés* in French**

#### Past participles ending in -u

*avoir* (to have) - *eu*

*boire* (to drink) - *bu*

*connaître* (to know) - *connu*

*croire* (to believe) - *cru*

*devoir* (have to, must, to owe) - *dû*

*lire* (to read) - *lu*

*pleuvoir* (to rain) - *plu*

*pouvoir* (can, to be able to) - *pu*

*recevoir* (to receive) - *reçu*

*savoir* (to know) - *su*

*voir* (to see) - *vu*

*vouloir* (to want) - *voulu*

#### Past participles ending in -is

*mettre* (to put) - *mis*

*prendre* (to take) - *pris*

#### Past participles ending in -it

*conduire* (to drive) - *conduit*

*dire* (to say) - *dit*

*écrire* (to write) - *écrit*

### Others

*être* (to be) - *été*

*faire* (to do, to make) - *fait*

*offrir* (to offer) - *offert*

*ouvrir* (to open) - *ouvert*