

How to use the present tense in French

The three groups of French verbs

For the present, as for other tenses in French, verbs are divided into three distinct groups:

The first group: verbs that end in *-er* and are regular. Examples: *gagner* (to win), *parler* (to speak), *dessiner* (to draw) etc.

The second group: verbs that end in *-ir* and are regular. Examples: *finir* (to finish), *grandir* (to grow up). **IMPORTANT!** Some verbs in *-ir* are irregular and belong to the 3rd group

The third group: irregular verbs. Examples: *être* (to be), *avoir* (to have), *aller* (to go), *faire* (to do), *mourir* (to die)

Verbs of the first group (-er)

To conjugate a verb from the first group in the present tense, simply remove the final *-er* from the infinitive of the verb, and then add the following endings depending on the subject:

- *danser* (to dance) = we remove the *-er*, we then have "*dans* "

- For *je* (I) we add **-e** : ***je danse***
- For *tu* (you, only one person), we add **-es** : ***tu dances***
- For *il/elle/on* (he/she/it), we add **-e**: ***il/elle/on danse***
- For *nous* (we), we add **-ons** : ***nous dansons***
- For *vous* (you, two or more people), we add **-ez** : ***vous dansez***
- For *ils/elles* (they), we add **-ent** (which is pronounced as if it were simply *-e*) = ***ils/elles dansent***

Be careful! There are some irregularities with some verbs of the first group that will be explained with at the end of this module.

Verbs of the second group (-ir)

To conjugate a verb from the second group in the present tense, simply remove the final *-ir* from the infinitive of the verb, and then add the following endings depending on the subject:

- *finir* (to finish) = we remove the *-ir*, we then have "*fin* "

- For *je* (I) we add **-is : je finis**
- For *tu* (you, only one person), we add **-is : tu finis**
- For *il/elle/on* (he/she/it), we add **-it : il/elle/on finit**
- For *nous* (we), we add **-issons : nous finissons**
- For *vous* (you, two or more people), we add **-issez : vous finissez**
- For *ils/elles* (they), we add **-issent** (which is pronounced as if it were simply -isse) = **ils/elles finissent**

Verbs of the third group (-dre)

For the verbs of the 3rd group, we have the verbs that end with *-dre*, which for most of them have a common pattern in the present tense. Simply remove the final *-re* from the infinitive of the verb, and then add the following endings depending on the subject:

- *vendre* (to sell) = we remove the *-re*, we then have " *vend* "

- For *je* (I) we add **-s : je vends**
- For *tu* (you, only one person), we add **-s : tu vends**
- For *il/elle/on* (he/she/it), we add nothing : **il/elle/on vend**
- For *nous* (we), we add **-ons: nous vendons**
- For *vous* (you, two or more people), we add **-ez : vous vendez**
- For *ils/elles* (they), we add **-ent** (which is pronounced as if it were simply *-e*) = **ils/elles vendent**

Be careful! *prendre* (to take) and *coudre* (to sew) do not follow this pattern (see at the end of this module)

Verbs of the third group (*tenir, venir*)

For the verbs of the 3rd group, it is very useful to know the conjugation of the verbs *tenir* (to hold) and *venir* (to come) since many other verbs are derived from these: *devenir* (to become), *parvenir* (to reach, to succeed), *revenir* (to come back), *intervenir* (to intervene, to step in), *appartenir* (to step in), *obtenir* (to get, to obtain).

- *je viens - tu tiens*
- *tu viens - tu tiens*
- *il/elle/on vient - il/elle/on tient*
- *nous venons – nous tenons*
- *vous venez – vous tenez*

- *ils/elles viennent – ils/elles tiennent* (the final –*ent* is pronounced as if it were simply –*e*)

For similar verbs, simply add the prefix before: *de+viens / par+viens / ob+tiens / re+venons / inter+viennent* etc. (always in one word)

The verbs of the third group (modals)

There are three modal verbs in French :

devoir (must/have to)

je dois

tu dois

il/elle/on doit

nous devons

vous devez

ils/elles doivent

pouvoir (can, be able to)

je peux

tu peux

il/elle/on peut

nous pouvons

vous pouvez

ils/elles peuvent

vouloir (to want)

je veux

tu veux

il/elle/on veut

nous voulons

vous voulez

ils/elles veulent

Verbs of the third group (important verbs)

Among the essential verbs to know, we have *être* (to be), *avoir* (to have) and *aller* (to go) which are all used to form other compound tenses, and *faire* (to do):

être

je suis

tu es

il/elle/on est

nous sommes

vous êtes

ils/elles sont

avoir

j'ai

tu as

il/elle/on a

nous avons

vous avez

ils/elles ont

aller

je vais

tu vas

il/elle/on va

nous allons

vous allez

ils/elles vont

faire

je fais

tu fais

il/elle/on fait
nous faisons
vous faites
ils/elles font

Other verbs of the third group

For the verbs of the 3rd group that were not mentioned above, you will find the conjugation of the most important of them at the end of this module.

When to use the French present tense? A comparison with English

As can be expected, the French present tense is used in contexts where the present simple or the present progressive is used in English:

(progressive present) I am running: *je cours* (if you want to reinforce the idea of an action in progress, you can add *être* conjugated with the present tense with *en train de*, then the verb in the infinitive form: *je suis en train de courir*)

(simple present) I run every day: *je cours tous les jours*

But the French present tense is also found where English will use other tenses, such as the future or the present perfect continuous. So do not follow the English conjugation to use the French present tense! Examples:

I have been singing for two hours = *je chante depuis deux heures*

I'm going to the doctor tomorrow at 2pm = *Je vais chez le médecin demain à 14h.*

In which contexts can we use the present tense?

- In French, the present tense can be used to express a current action or a current state. Examples:

I'm talking = *Je parle* (or *Je suis en train de parler*)

Sorry, I'm currently working = *Désolé, je travaille actuellement* (or *Je suis actuellement en train de travailler*)

He's late = *Il est en retard*

- The present tense can be used to express a habit or a repeated action, or a general state. Examples:

I work every Friday = *Je travaille tous les vendredis*

He's always late = *Il est toujours en retard*

- The present tense can be used to express a future action, when the date of it is known and specified (possibility also to use the future, see the chapter "Expressing the future in French"). Examples:

I'm working next week = *Je travaille la semaine prochaine*

I'm cooking tomorrow evening at home = *Je cuisine demain soir chez moi*

- The present tense can be used to express absolute or general truth. Example:

The sun rises in the east. = *Le soleil se lève à l'est.*

Water will boil at 100 °C = *L'eau bout à 100 °C.*

- The present tense can be used to express an action that started in the past and is still ongoing at the present moment:

I have been swimming for one hour. = *Je nage depuis une heure.*

I have been travelling since last week. = *Je voyage depuis la semaine dernière.*

- The present tense can be used to express a likely condition in 'if' sentences. Note here that the verb that expresses what happens if the condition is true, is in the future. Refer to the chapter " The Conditional " for details on "if" contexts. Here are some examples:

If he comes, I won't stay. = *S'il vient* (the condition, present tense), *je ne resterai pas* (what happens if it's the case, futur).

If you win, I'll congratulate you = *Si tu gagnes, je te féliciterai.* (the condition "tu gagnes" is in the present, and what I will do if it is the case, "te féliciterai", is in the future)

Irregularities of some verbs of the 1st group

- Verbs ending in *-cer*. The « c » turns into « ç » when the verb is conjugated with « nous ». This change happens to keep the "s" sound before *-ons*. Example: *je commence* (I begin), but *nous commençons* (we begin).

Here is a list of a few verbs having this irregularity:

placer (to place), *commencer* (to begin), *balancer* (to throw), *tracer* (to trace/to track), *forcer* (to force)

- Verbs ending in *-ger*. We add an « e » after « g » when conjugated with « nous ». This change happens to keep the soft "g" sound before *-ons*. Example: *je mange* (I eat), but *nous mangeons* (we eat).

Here is a list of a few verbs having this irregularity:

changer (to change), *exiger* (to require/impose), *voyager* (to travel), *corriger* (correct), *manger* (to eat)

- Verbs ending in *-ayer, -uyer* and *-oyer*. The « y » becomes « i » except when conjugated with « nous » and « vous ». Example: *j'essaie* (I try), *tu essaies*

(you try), *il/elle essaie* (he/she tries), but *nous essayons* (we try), *vous essayez* (you try), and then back to « i », *ils essaient* (they try)

Here is a list of a few verbs having this irregularity:

essayer (to try), *payer* (to pay), *balayer* (to sweep), *effrayer* (to scare), *nettoyer* (to clean), *essuyer* (to wipe)

- Verbs ending in *-eler* and *-eter*. All the forms except « *nous* » and « *vous* », will double the « l » or the « t » when conjugated in the present tense. Examples: *j'appelle* (I call) or *tu appelles* (you call), but *nous appelons* (we call) and *vous appelez* (you call). Another example: *il jette* (he throws), but *nous jetons* (we throw) and *vous jetez* (you throw)

Here is a list of a few verbs having this irregularity:

appeler (to call), *épeler* (to spell), *rappeler* (to call back), *jeter* (to throw), *rejeter* (to reject), *projeter* (to project)

Be careful! Note that « e » before the double « l » and double « t », is pronounced as « è ».

- Verbs ending in *-eler*, *-ener*, *-eter*, *-eser*, and *-ever* which don't have a double consonant in their spelling, will take an « accent grave » (« è ») in all forms, except with *nous* and *vous*. Example: *je gèle* (I'm freezing), but *nous gelons* (we are freezing) and *vous gelez* (you are freezing)

Here is a list of a few verbs having this irregularity:

geler (to freeze), *peler* (to peel), *emmener* (to bring), *mener* (to lead), *(se) promener* (to walk/take a walk), *acheter* (to buy), *achever* (to complete/to finish off), *élever* (to raise), *enlever* (to remove), *lever* (to lift)

Be careful! Note that *épeler* (to spell), *jeter* (to throw) and similar verbs *rejeter* or *projeter* follow the pattern of *appeler* despite not having a double consonant in their spelling (see the previous paragraph)

- Verbs ending in *-éder*, *-érer*, *-éter* and *-ébrer*. The last « é » will become « è » in all forms, except with *nous* and *vous* (it stays « é »). Example: *je cède* (I yield), but *nous cédon*s (we yield) and *vous cédez* (you yield)

Here is a list of a few verbs having this irregularity:

céder (to yield), *espérer* (to hope), *préférer* (to prefer), *exagérer* (to exaggerate), *considérer* (to consider), *répéter* (to repeat/rehearse), *célébrer* (to celebrate)

Verbs of the 3rd group: *prendre* and *coudre*

These two verbs are different from the other verbs ending with *-dre*:

prendre (to take)

je prends
tu prends
il/elle/on prend
*nous **prenons***
*vous **prenez***
*ils/elles **prennent***

coudre (to sew)

je couds
tu couds
il/elle/on coud
*nous **cousons***
*vous **cousez***
*ils/elles **cousent***

Verbs of the 3rd group: *mettre* and verbs ending in *-tre*

Note that the consonant 't' only doubles if it is followed by a vowel, if the verb has two 't's in its infinitive form:

mettre (to put)

je mets
tu mets
il/elle/on met
*nous **mettons***
*vous **mettez***
*ils/elles **mettent***

Verbs of the 3rd group: ending in *-ir*

To find out if a verb that ends in *-ir* belongs to the 2nd or the 3rd group, you have to add the ending *-ant*:

- If you have *-issant*, then this is the 2nd group. Exemple: *grandissant* (verb *grandir* = to grow)

- If we don't have that, then this is the 3rd group. Exemple: *disant* (verb *dire* = to say)

The verbs of the 3rd group that end in *-ir* follow the pattern of *courir*. There are two exceptions, *dire* and *servir*.

courir (to run)

je cours

tu cours

elle/il/on court

nous courons

vous courez

ils/elles courent

dire (to say)

je dis

tu dis

elle/il/on dit

*nous **disons***

*vous **dites***

*ils/elles **disent***

servir (to serve)

je sers

tu sers

elle/il/on sert

*nous **servons***

*vous **servez***

*ils/elles **servent***

Be careful! The verbs *offrir* (to offer), *ouvrir* (to open), *souffrir* (to suffer) and *cueillir* (to pick/to pluck) are conjugated like the verbs of the first group

Verbs of the 3rd group: endings in *-eindre*, *-aindre* and *-oindre*

For these verbs, we remove the final *-dre* and then we add the following endings:

craindre (to fear)

je crains

tu crains

elle/il/on craint

nous craignons

vous craignez

ils/elles craignent

joindre (to join)

je joins

tu joins

elle/il/on joint

nous joignons

vous joignez

ils/elles joignent

peindre (to paint)

je peins

tu peins

elle/il/on peint

nous peignons

vous peignez

ils/elles peignent

Verbs of the 3rd group: endings in *-oir* and *-cevoir*

The verbs in *-cevoir* are conjugated like *percevoir* (to perceive), the verbs in *-oir* like *voir* (to see) and *pleuvoir* (to rain) is different:

apercevoir

j'aperçois

tu aperçois
elle/il/on aperçoit
nous apercevons
vous apercevez
ils/elles aperçoivent

voir
je vois
tu vois
elle/il/on voit
nous voyons
vous voyez
ils/elles voient

pleuvoir
Il/elle pleut
ils/elles pleuvent