Silent letters Les lettres muettes

Read me first: French spelling keeps letters it stopped saying long ago. This guide goes past the basics: which letters vanish, which come back, and how words run together in real speech.

Last consonants: usually silent, one for each letter

petit	grand	vous	trop	prix	nez
small	big	you	too much	price	nose
puh-tee	**gran**	**voo**	**tro**	**pree**	**nay**

Plurals too: the plural -s is silent, so chat and chats sound the same. Listen to the little word in front: le chat is luh sha, les chats is lay sha.

CaReFuL: c, r, f and l at the end are usually said

avec	bonjour	neuf	avril
with **a-vek**	hello **bon-zhoor**	nine, new **nuhf**	April **a-vreel**
le sac, le parc	la mer, cher	le chef, vif	le sel, l'hôtel

The honest exceptions

r	silent in -er endings, which sound like é	parler, premier, dernier
c	silent in a few words	blanc, tabac
l	silent in a few words	gentil, outil
f	silent in a few words	la clef, les œufs

And the other way round

A few words say a last letter outside CaReFuL. Learn them as you meet them:

le bus, le fils, l'ouest, sept

bus, feess (son), west, set (seven).

Last -e: silent, but it wakes up the letter before it

petit / petite	grand / grande	vert / verte	gris / grise
small	big	green	grey
puh-tee / puh-teet	**gran / grand**	**vair / vairt**	**gree / greez**

That's how you hear he or she in describing words: il est petit, elle est petite. A last e with no accent is silent: la table, je parle. With an accent it's always said: café, été. In fast speech a middle e drops too: samedi sounds like sam-dee.

-ent: two ways

In verbs it's silent: ils parlent, elles mangent, ils disent.
Everywhere else it's the nasal an: le vent, souvent, l'argent.

h: never said

Most h words act like a vowel: l'homme, les◡hommes. A few act like a consonant, so no l' and no link: le héros, les | héros.

Vowels Les voyelles

Keep them pure: English vowels slide. Go ends in a little w and say ends in a little y. French eau and é stop dead. Hold your mouth still while you say them.

ou or u: the pair that changes the meaning

ou [u]

oo in food, lips round and pushed forward.

vous, tout, rouge, nous

u [y]

The tricky one. Say ee and hold it. Now round your lips into a small circle, as if to whistle, but keep your tongue where it was.

tu, vu, rue, salut

vous	vs	vu	tout	vs	tu	roue	vs	rue	dessous	vs	dessus
you		seen	all		you	wheel		street	under		on top

Why it matters: say vous with the u sound and it becomes vu, seen. If French people hear oo where you meant u, that's the first sound to fix.

The other vowels

Letters	Sounds like	Examples
e	a in about, short and soft [ə]	le, je, petit, demain
é, -er, -ez	ay in say, short, no y at the end [e]	café, parler, vous parlez
è, ê, ai, ei	e in bed [ɛ]	mère, fête, mais, neige
eu, œu	at the end of a word: say ay with rounded lips [ø]	deux, peu, bleu
eu, œu	before a said consonant: u in fur, lips rounded [œ]	peur, sœur, heure, un œuf
au, eau, o	o in go, with no w at the end [o]	beau, chaud, eau, mot
o	usually before a said consonant: o in British hot [ɔ]	porte, bonne, homme, école
oi	wa [wa]	moi, toi, trois, voir
ill	in most words: y in yes [j]	fille, famille, juillet
-ail, -eil, -euil	a vowel, then a little y [aj, ɛj, œj]	travail, soleil, fauteuil

é or è? élève has both: ay-lev. And parler, parlé and parlez all end on the same é. Many French speakers blur é and è at the end of a word, so don't worry: keep é tight and è open.

ill has rebels: in ville, mille and tranquille it's a plain l: veel, meel, tran-keel. Everywhere else, think y: fille is fee-y.

Nasal vowels Les voyelles nasales

How: when n or m ends a syllable, you don't say it. The vowel before it goes through your nose instead. Test it: pinch your nose. If the sound changes, you're doing it right.

The four nasal sounds

an [ɑ̃]

an, am, en, em

ah through the nose, mouth open

enfant, chambre, temps, vent

in [ɛ̃]

in, im, ain, ein, aim

a in cat, through the nose

vin, impossible, pain, plein, faim

on [ɔ̃]

on, om

oh through the nose, lips round

bon, nom, onze, monde

un [œ̃]

un, um

like in, lips a little rounder

un, brun, parfum, lundi

About un: most of France now says it just like in, so brun and brin sound the same. Belgium, Québec and the south keep it rounder. Either way you'll be understood.

Two more spellings

oin is w + in: loin, moins, point (lwan, mwan, pwan).
ien is y + in: bien, chien, rien (byan, shyan, ryan).

m before b and p

Before b and p, French writes m instead of n. The sound stays the same nasal: chambre, temps, impossible, nombre, tomber.

A vowel after it, or a double n, cancels the nasal

bon / bonne good	an / année year	un / une one, a	plein / pleine full
fin / fine end, thin	italien / italienne Italian	cousin / cousine cousin	Jean / Jeanne a name

So: bon is nasal, but in bonne you hear the n, like Bonn. That's also how you hear he or she: italien, italienne. A few words starting with enn- or emm- stay nasal anyway: ennui, emmener.

Read these aloud: an, on, in

vent wind	vont they go	vin wine	sans without	son sound, his	saint saint	banc bench	bon good	bain bath

All four in one line: un bon vin blanc, a good white wine. Say it slowly, then fast. Not one n in it is said.

Linking Liaison et élision

Spoken French has no gaps. inside a phrase, words run into each other like one long word. Three things glue them: liaison, élision and enchaînement. Learn them, and a line like il est◡arrivé stops sounding like one word you don't know.

Liaison: a silent letter wakes up before a vowel

les◡amis
the friends
lay-za-mee

vous◡avez
you have
voo-za-vay

petit◡ami
boyfriend
puh-tee-ta-mee

deux◡enfants
two children
duh-zan-fan

grand◡homme
great man
gran-tom

un◡ami
a friend
un-na-mee

ils ont or ils sont?

ils◡ont — they have · eel-zon

ils sont — they are · eel-son

A z or an s is all that tells have from are. Listen for it.

Sounds change

s and x link as z, d links as t, and n links as n. So grand◡homme sounds like gran-tom, and deux◡enfants like duh-zan-fan.

Always link

After les, des, un, mon, ton, son: les◡amis. After nous, vous, ils, elles, on before a verb: nous◡avons. After short words like très, dans, chez, en: en◡Italie.

Never link

After et: toi et | elle. Before an h that acts like a consonant: les | héros. After a singular noun: le train | arrive. After verbs it's your choice, and everyday speech often skips it.

Élision: short words lose their vowel before a vowel

le, la → l'	**je → j'**	**ce → c'**	**que → qu'**
l'ami, l'eau	j'ai, j'aime	c'est	qu'il, qu'elle
ne → n'	**de → d'**	**me, te → m', t'**	**si → s'**
n'est, n'a	d'accord	je t'aime	s'il, before il only

Enchaînement: a said consonant slides onto the next word

avec◡elle
with her
a-veh-kel

une◡amie
a friend (f)
u-na-mee

il◡est
he is
ee-leh

elle◡a
she has
eh-la

Why it sounds fast: a letter that's always said, like the c in avec, moves over to start the next word. So French syllables mostly start with a consonant, and the gaps between words disappear.

Spoken French Le français parlé

Subtitles tidy it up. they often write je ne sais pas while the actor says chais pas. Here's how the spelling and the sound drift apart in everyday speech.

Written, then what you hear

WRITTEN
Je ne sais pas
YOU HEAR
Chais pas
shay-pa
I don't know

WRITTEN
Je suis
YOU HEAR
Chuis
shwee
I am

WRITTEN
Il y a
YOU HEAR
Y a
ya
there is, there are

WRITTEN
Tu as
YOU HEAR
T'as
ta
you have

WRITTEN
Tu es
YOU HEAR
T'es
tay
you are (T'es où ? where are you?)

WRITTEN
Il faut
YOU HEAR
I' faut
ee-fo
we have to, you have to

WRITTEN
Ce n'est pas
YOU HEAR
C'est pas
say-pa
it's not

WRITTEN
Petit
YOU HEAR
P'tit
ptee
small, little

ne disappears: in speech the ne of a negative almost always goes, and pas carries the no: Je veux pas, I don't want to. On sait jamais, you never know.

je melts: before a hard sound like s, p or t, je turns into a soft sh: je peux sounds like shpuh. That's where chais pas and chuis come from.

The French r

Back of the throat

Make it where you'd gargle, very softly. Start a g as in go, but don't close it: let the air rub through. Don't roll it with the tip of your tongue, and don't use the English r.

Say these slowly

rouge, Paris, très, merci, encore, au revoir

Keep it soft: a light rasp, never a growl. After t, as in très and trop, it blends right into the t.

Stress: the last syllable lifts

Even, then up at the end

English stresses one syllable in each word: BA-na-na, ho-TEL. French says every syllable evenly and lifts only the last one of a group:

ba-na-**NE** · je sais **PAS** · on y **VA**

Little sounds that fill gaps

euh um · **ben** well · **bah** well, er · **hein** right? · **quoi** at the end of a line: you know. You'll hear them in every scene.

Heard a word you don't know? In Kitsumi, hover any word in French subtitles to see what it means.

Practice Entraînement

How: cover the right side with a strip of paper. Read each line out loud: skip the grey letters and join the words at each link mark. Then slide the strip down and check the sound and the meaning.

1	Qu'est-ce qu'il y a ?	**kess-keel-ya** What's wrong?
2	Je sais pas.	**shay-pa, said chais pas** I don't know.
3	Les◡enfants dorment.	**lay-zan-fan dorm** The kids are asleep.
4	Vous◡avez faim ?	**voo-za-vay fan** Are you hungry?
5	C'est◡un◡ami.	**say-tun-na-mee** He's a friend.
6	Ils◡ont raison.	**eel-zon ray-zon** They're right.
7	Y a un problème.	**ya un pro-blem** There's a problem.
8	T'as vu ça ?	**ta vu sa** Did you see that?
9	Je suis crevé.	**shwee kruh-vay, said chuis** I'm exhausted.
10	On◡y va !	**on-nee-va** Let's go!
11	Elle◡est partie.	**eh-leh par-tee** She's gone.
12	Laisse-moi tranquille !	**less-mwa tran-keel** Leave me alone!

Next: listen for these in a show you like. Once you've caught chais pas and on y va a few times, you'll hear them everywhere.