# How French verbs work Les verbes



**Every verb has a dictionary form.** It ends in -er, -ir or -re. Drop that ending and you have the stem. Then add a new ending that goes with who is doing it.

## -er verbs about 9 in 10 verbs

**parler** speak

parl + e = parle je parle, I speak

| | |
|---|---|
| aimer<br>like, love | regarder<br>watch |
| manger<br>eat | écouter<br>listen |
| travailler<br>work | chercher<br>look for |

## -ir verbs the finir family

**finir** finish

fin + is = finis je finis, I finish

| | |
|---|---|
| choisir<br>choose | réussir<br>succeed |
| grandir<br>grow up | réfléchir<br>think it over |
| remplir<br>fill | obéir<br>obey |

## -re verbs the smallest family

**vendre** sell

vend + s = vends je vends, I sell

| | |
|---|---|
| attendre<br>wait | entendre<br>hear |
| répondre<br>answer | perdre<br>lose |
| descendre<br>go down | rendre<br>give back |

## Always say who: the pronoun never drops

| je | tu | il, elle, on | nous | vous | ils, elles |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I** | **you** | **he, she, we** | **we** | **you** | **they** |
| j' before a vowel | one friend | on = we in speech | more careful | polite, or you all | elles: all female |
| je parle | tu parles | il parle | nous parlons | vous parlez | ils parlent |

**Grey letters are silent.** Look at the forms above: je, tu, il and ils all say parl, and only nous and vous add a sound. So the ending can't tell you who. The little word in front does, and that's why French always keeps it.

## The big point: these four verbs sound exactly the same

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Je parle vite.<br>I talk fast. | Tu parles trop !<br>You talk too much! | Elle parle anglais.<br>She speaks English. | Ils parlent fort.<br>They talk loudly. |

**Read it, don't hear it:** parle, parles and parlent are three spellings of one sound. And vous parlez sounds just like parler and parlé. Your ears pick the meaning from the word in front.

## tu, vous and on

### tu
you, one person, casual

friends, family, kids, people your age.

Tu viens ?

### vous
you, one person, polite

strangers, shops, work, older people.

Vous venez ?

### vous
you all

more than one person, polite or not. Same form.

Vous êtes prêts ?

### on
we, in speech

everyday French says on for nous. It takes the il, elle form.

On mange ?

**Not sure?** use vous with someone new and wait to be offered tu. On sounds casual, never rude: On y va ? means shall we go?

**Meet a verb you don't know?** In Kitsumi, hover any word in French subtitles to see what it means. Then come back here and work out the form.

# The present tense Le présent

2 · grey is silent · pink you hear

## The three regular patterns: shaded forms sound the same

| | parler<br>speak | finir<br>finish | vendre<br>sell |
|---|---|---|---|
| **je, j'**<br>I | parle | finis | vends |
| **tu**<br>you, one friend | parles | finis | vends |
| **il, elle, on**<br>he, she, we (on) | parle | finit | vend |
| **nous**<br>we | parlons | finissons | vendons |
| **vous**<br>you polite, you all | parlez | finissez | vendez |
| **ils, elles**<br>they | parlent | finissent | vendent |

**One form, two meanings:** je parle is both I speak and I'm speaking. French has no separate -ing form: Je mange, I'm eating. Before a vowel je becomes j': j'aime, j'écoute.

## Ten verbs you hear all the time: pink marks the surprises

| | être<br>be | avoir<br>have | aller<br>go | faire<br>do, make | pouvoir<br>can |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **je, j'**<br>I | suis | ai | vais | fais | peux |
| **tu**<br>you, one friend | es | as | vas | fais | peux |
| **il, elle, on**<br>he, she, we (on) | est | a | va | fait | peut |
| **nous**<br>we | sommes | avons | allons | faisons | pouvons |
| **vous**<br>you polite, you all | **êtes** | avez | allez | **faites** | pouvez |
| **ils, elles**<br>they | **sont** | **ont** | **vont** | **font** | peuvent |

| | vouloir<br>want | savoir<br>know (a fact) | venir<br>come | prendre<br>take | dire<br>say, tell |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **je, j'**<br>I | veux | sais | viens | prends | dis |
| **tu**<br>you, one friend | veux | sais | viens | prends | dis |
| **il, elle, on**<br>he, she, we (on) | veut | sait | vient | prend | dit |
| **nous**<br>we | voulons | savons | venons | prenons | disons |
| **vous**<br>you polite, you all | voulez | savez | venez | prenez | **dites** |
| **ils, elles**<br>they | veulent | savent | viennent | prennent | disent |

**Spot the pattern:** in je, tu and il the endings -s, -s, -t are silent, so most of these sound alike three times: fais, fais, fait. Only vous **êtes**, **faites** and **dites** end in -tes, and only ils **sont**, **ont**, **vont** and **font** end in -ont.

**être and avoir work twice:** on their own, je suis, I am, j'ai, I have. And as helpers for the past on the next page: j'ai mangé, je suis venu. Learn these two first.

# The past Le passé composé



**Two pieces:** a present form of avoir, or of être for a few verbs, plus the past participle. J'ai mangé is I ate and I have eaten: one form for both. It's the past you hear most.

| | avoir + parlé<br>most verbs | être + allé<br>the être verbs |
|---|---|---|
| **je, j'**<br>I | j'ai parlé | je suis allé(e) |
| **tu**<br>you, one friend | tu as parlé | tu es allé(e) |
| **il, elle, on**<br>he, she, we (on) | il a parlé · elle a parlé | il est allé · elle est allé**e** |
| **nous**<br>we | nous avons parlé | nous sommes allé(e)**s** |
| **vous**<br>you polite, you all | vous avez parlé | vous êtes allé(e)(s) |
| **ils, elles**<br>they | ils ont parlé | ils sont allé**s** · elles sont allé**es** |

## The past participle: three regular patterns

### -er → -é

| | |
|---|---|
| parler<br>**parlé** | manger<br>**mangé** |
| aller<br>**allé** | regarder<br>**regardé** |

### -ir → -i

| | |
|---|---|
| finir<br>**fini** | choisir<br>**choisi** |
| partir<br>**parti** | dormir<br>**dormi** |

### -re → -u

| | |
|---|---|
| vendre<br>**vendu** | attendre<br>**attendu** |
| perdre<br>**perdu** | répondre<br>**répondu** |

## Ten irregular ones to know by heart

être
**été**
J'ai été malade.
I was sick.

avoir
**eu**
J'ai eu peur.
I got scared.

faire
**fait**
Tu as fait quoi ?
What did you do?

prendre
**pris**
J'ai pris le train.
I took the train.

dire
**dit**
Il a dit non.
He said no.

voir
**vu**
Tu as vu ça ?
Did you see that?

pouvoir
**pu**
Je n'ai pas pu.
I couldn't.

vouloir
**voulu**
J'ai voulu t'aider.
I wanted to help you.

savoir
**su**
Je l'ai su hier.
I found out yesterday.

venir
**venu**
Il est venu hier.
He came yesterday.

## The être verbs: coming, going, staying

These take être, not avoir. Most come in pairs, in and out:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **aller** go | allé | **venir** come | venu |
| **partir** leave | parti | **arriver** arrive | arrivé |
| **sortir** go out | sorti | **entrer** go in | entré |
| **rester** stay | resté | **tomber** fall | tombé |
| **naître** be born | né | **mourir** die | mort |

So do all reflexive verbs: je me suis levé, I got up. With être the participle agrees, like an adjective: elle est parti**e**, ils sont arrivé**s**. You can't hear it except in mort, morte.

## The other past: was, used to

The imparfait sets the scene: how things were, what was going on, what you used to do. Take the nous form, drop -ons, add -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient. Only être is odd: ét-.

| être | avoir | aller | faire |
|---|---|---|---|
| **était**<br>was | **avait**<br>had | **allait**<br>was going, used to go | **faisait**<br>was doing |

**Quand j'étais petit, j'allais à la plage.**
When I was little, I used to go to the beach.

**Je dormais quand tu as appelé.**
I was sleeping when you called. Background, then what happened.

# Future, no, questions Futur et questions



## The easy future: aller + verb

A present form of aller, then the dictionary form: je vais, tu vas, il va, nous allons, vous allez, ils vont + manger. It's how people talk about plans.

**Je vais manger.**
I'm going to eat.

**Tu vas voir.**
You'll see.

**On va être en retard.**
We're going to be late.

**Ça va aller.**
It's going to be OK.

**Il va pleuvoir.**
It's going to rain.

**Tu vas faire quoi ?**
What are you going to do?

## The one-word future

Add the endings -ai, -as, -a, -ons, -ez, -ont to the dictionary form (-re verbs drop the e). Those are avoir's present endings. Some verbs use a new stem, but the endings never change.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| parler parlerai | finir finirai | vendre vendrai | être serai |
| avoir aurai | aller irai | faire ferai | pouvoir pourrai |
| vouloir voudrai | savoir saurai | venir viendrai | voir verrai |

You hear it most in a few lines: On verra, we'll see. Ça ira, it'll be fine.

## Saying no: ne before the verb, pas after

WRITTEN
Je ne sais pas.
SPOKEN
**Je sais pas.**
I don't know.

WRITTEN
Ce n'est pas grave.
SPOKEN
**C'est pas grave.**
It's no big deal.

WRITTEN
Je ne comprends pas.
SPOKEN
**Je comprends pas.**
I don't understand.

WRITTEN
Il n'y a pas de problème.
SPOKEN
**Y a pas de problème.**
No problem.

WRITTEN
Ne t'inquiète pas.
SPOKEN
**T'inquiète pas.**
Don't worry.

**Where did ne go?** in speech it nearly always drops, and pas does the work. Write it, but expect not to hear it. Before a vowel ne becomes n', and in the past it wraps the helper: je n'ai pas compris.

**ne ... jamais** never
Je ne bois jamais de café.

**ne ... rien** nothing
Je ne vois rien.

**ne ... plus** not any more
Il n'y a plus de pain.

**ne ... personne** nobody
Je ne connais personne.

## Questions three ways

### 1 · Just your voice
the most common in speech

Tu viens ?

Tu fais quoi ?

Tu vas où ?

### 2 · Est-ce que in front
neutral, safe anywhere

Est-ce que tu viens ?

Qu'est-ce que tu fais ?

Où est-ce que tu vas ?

### 3 · Flip verb and pronoun
formal, mostly written

Viens-tu ?

Que fais-tu ?

Où vas-tu ?

**Same three questions in each box:** Are you coming? What are you doing? Where are you going? Start with your voice: say a plain sentence and let it go up at the end. In a flip, a -t- keeps two vowels apart: Va-t-il ? Parle-t-elle ?

# Practice Entraînement

5 · ten lines straight from shows · cover the right side

**How:** cover the right side with a strip of paper. Read the line out loud, say what it means and which form the pink verb is, then slide the strip down to check.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Je **sais** pas. | **I don't know.**<br>savoir, present, je. The ne is dropped: je ne sais pas |
| 2 | On y **va**. | **Let's go.**<br>aller, present, on = we. y means there |
| 3 | Qu'est-ce que tu **fais** ? | **What are you doing?**<br>faire, present, tu. A question with est-ce que |
| 4 | J'**ai** faim. | **I'm hungry.**<br>avoir, present, je. In French you have hunger |
| 5 | Je t'**aime**. | **I love you.**<br>aimer, present, je. te shrinks to t' before a vowel |
| 6 | Tu **viens** ? | **Are you coming?**<br>venir, present, tu. A question by voice only |
| 7 | C'**est** pas grave. | **It's no big deal.**<br>être, present, il (ce). The ne is dropped |
| 8 | Il **faut** partir. | **We have to go.**<br>falloir, present, only with il: it's necessary to |
| 9 | J'**ai compris**. | **I get it. / Understood.**<br>comprendre, passé composé: avoir + compris, like pris |
| 10 | **Laisse**-moi. | **Leave me alone. / Let me.**<br>laisser, an order to tu. -er verbs lose the s here |

## Your turn: make the form

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | être je | suis | 2 | avoir tu | as |
| 3 | parler nous | parlons | 4 | finir ils | finissent |
| 5 | faire vous | faites | 6 | prendre elle | prend |
| 7 | aller ils | vont | 8 | manger je, past | j'ai mangé |
| 9 | partir elle, past | elle est partie | 10 | être on, future | on sera |

**Next:** listen for these in a show you like. Once you've heard Je sais pas and On y va a few times, you'll catch them without thinking.