

A FEW PRINCIPLES OF FRENCH SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

I. General Principles

Below are only the most general principles to guide students and serve as reference.

A. Diacritical marks: The French alphabet is similar to the English alphabet, but French uses a number of diacritical marks which usually influence pronunciation. These marks never indicate that a syllable should be stressed. They are:

1. The acute accent: ´ é (accent aigu). Appears only on the vowel e:
été, téléphone, éléphant, élevé
2. The grave accent: ` è (accent grave). Used most often in the combination: [è + consonant + mute e] at the end of a word. Whenever this combination of [è + consonant + mute e] occurs at the end of a word, the e must have a grave accent: frère, pièce, pèse, achète, etc. (Except in the following two cases: (1) when the consonant is an x -- complexe, circonflexe; and (2) when an etymological s has disappeared -- même, quêtè, arrête, and in that case the accent is a circumflex instead of a grave.) The grave accent also appears in a few specific words, without altering the pronunciation. These are: à (preposition) to distinguish it from a (verb to have, 3rd pers. sing. pres.), là (adverb) to distinguish it from la (article) and où (adverb) to distinguish it from ou (conjunction).
3. The circumflex accent: ^ ê, â, ô, î, û (accent circonflexe). Used on all vowels, but mostly on e: tête, quêtè, (often before a t) âtre, âme, sùr, hôte, plaît.
4. The cedilla: ç (la cédille). Used only under a c to indicate that it is pronounced [s], before a, o, u: français, garçon, reçu.
5. The diaeresis: " ë (le tréma). Used to show that the vowel on which it is placed should be pronounced clearly separated from the preceding one: Noël, égoïste, naïf.

B. Elision: Elision occurs when a vowel is dropped before another word beginning with a vowel: L'ami d'Ernest dit qu'il prend l'auto. (le) (de) (que) (la).

Elision occurs only for some vowels and in specific cases. The following will elide:

1. final e of words of one syllable: je (j'ai), me (il m'a dit), te, ce (c'est), se, de (l'ami d'Ernest), le, ne (ce n'est pas), que (il dit qu'il).

2. a elides only in the case of la: l'auto, l'enveloppe, l'adresse (la) (la) (la).

3. i elides only in one case: si followed by il(s): s'il^(s), but: qui il (no elision).

4. There is elision in front of words beginning with h, since h is usually mute: l'homme, l'huitre.

A few words beginning with h will not cause elision because the h is aspirate (these are usually words of Germanic origin): la Hollande, la hutte, la hache, le hibou.

C. Linking of words, or liaison: Words closely connected by meaning are run together as one word; this means that the last consonant of an individual word--which is not pronounced otherwise--becomes the introductory consonant of the following word. Liaison happens mostly with the following letters:

s
x
z } all pronounced [s]: les amis, dix amis, chez eux, ils ont

d
t } both pronounced [t]: un petit ami, un grand ami, quand il

n pronounced [n]: un ami, en avion, il y en a

Liaison is necessary:

1. between the article and the noun: les amis, les hommes, un homme

2. between an adjective and the following noun: un petit ami, un grand ami, de beaux enfants

3. between subject pronoun and verb, or between verb and subject pronoun: ils ont, ont-elles? elles arrivent, nous irons, iront-ils?

4. between a monosyllabic preposition and its object: chez elle

Liaison is absolutely forbidden after the conjunction et: mon frère et // un ami

D. The syllable: French words can be divided into syllables. A syllable is a group of letters which are uttered together. In dividing French words into syllables, each syllable should begin with a consonant and end with a vowel whenever possible. This means that in pronunciation

exercises, you must avoid anticipating the next consonant while pronouncing the words. For instance, compare:

| | | | |
|---------|--------------|--------|--------------|
| ENGLISH | an-i-mal | FRENCH | a-ni-mal |
| | per-im-e-ter | | pé-ri-mè-tre |
| | sal-ad | | sa-lade |
| | pres-i-dent | | prési-dent |

This division applies to writing, where a word must never be cut in such a way that a vowel would be the first letter on the next line: aca-démie, uni-versité.

In the case of two consonants: pas-ser, par-tir, pa-trie

II. The French alphabet and its sounds

A. Vowels: Each vowel represents a fixed sound. The French vowel has a pure sound, as compared to the English vowel which represents a combination of several sounds. There is no gliding from one sound to another, as in English, and therefore, no diphthongs. To utter a vowel sound, it is often necessary to advance and round the lips, and hold the position firmly, but with great mobility to go from one sound to another. If you master the vowels, you will be very close to having mastered French pronunciation.

a [ɑ]: la gare, l'accident, papa, la table, Paris
 e, ei, ê [ɛ]: sept, seize, bête
 e [e]: je, me, le, que, de, venir, demain, le cheval
 i [i]: ici, Virginie, la ville, la visite, la machine, petit
 o [ɔ]: joli, l'école, l'objet, la robe, la location
 o (when followed by a silent final consonant, or by a [z] sound)
 [o]: le mo~~z~~, le do~~z~~, gro~~z~~, la rose, la chose, poser,
 u [y]: sur, la rue, du café, il a bu
 ou [u]: sous, boue, roue

B. Consonants: For practical purposes, there is less difference between the sound of French and English consonants, than in the case of vowels. However, note the following facts:

1. The final consonant is usually not pronounced: le hasar~~z~~, tro~~z~~, le départ~~z~~, vers~~z~~ (Exceptions: CaReFuL)
2. The "s" of the plural is also silent: parent = parent~~s~~, ami = ami~~s~~, fleur = fleur~~s~~
3. There may be more than one final silent consonant: le temps [tɑ̃], vingt [vɑ̃], le doigt [dwa], quatre-vingts [vɑ̃], les doigts [dwa]

4. h is silent: l'histoire, l'homme, la honte, la Hollande

5. qu, a very common spelling combination in French, is pronounced [k]:
quart [kar], quand, quelque, qu'est-ce que c'est?

6. s is pronounced [z] between two vowels: la rose, la chose, une pause, animosité, les amis, and [s] in all other cases:
double: la tasse, la bosse, la tresse, impossible
initial: Suzanne, société, splendide
between vowel and consonant: socialisme, asperite, obsession

7. w, which is found only in a few words, is pronounced [v]

C. Nasal vowels: The nasal vowel is a very distinctive sound of French. It occurs when a vowel is followed by an n or m **in the same syllable**. Then, the vowel is nasalized and the n or m is not pronounced. There are several spellings for each nasal vowel, but only one sound for each:

[ã]: grand, Jean, anglais, allemand
ambulance, chambre, champ
enfant, la dent, vendre
emporter, le temps, ensemble

an
am
en
em

one sound: [ã]

[ɛ̃]: matin, jardin, invite, fin
impossible, timbre
peintre, teint
examen, européen, citoyen
pain, demain, bain
faïm

in
im
ein
-en (word final)
ain
(aim)

one sound: [ɛ̃]

[ɔ̃]: mon, bâton, garçon, onze
compter, le nombre, le nom

on
om

one sound: [ɔ̃]

[œ̃]: un, lundi, chacun
parfum

un
um

one sound: un [œ̃]

When the n or m is double, or when it is followed by a vowel, there is usually no nasal sound:

un [œ̃], but: u/ne [yn], u/nanime, chacu/ne
an [ɑ̃], but: â/ne [an], A/nne, a/nnée, a/nimal
bon [bɔ̃], but: bo/nne [bɔ̃n], co/mité, bo/ni/ment, co/mme
fin [fɛ̃], but: fi/ne [fin], i/mmobile, pei/ne

Compare:

| <u>nasal</u> | | <u>no nasal</u> | |
|--------------|--------|-----------------|----------|
| américain | Simon | américai/ne | Simo/ne |
| européen | chacun | europée/nne | chacu/ne |
| bon | un | bo/nne | u/ne |

Note the sound of -emm (= [am]) in femme and in some adverbs: prudemment, intelligemment

D. Letter groups with a single sound: There are certain groups of letters which have a fixed, invariable sound:

au or eau [o]: château, au, aujourd'hui, bateau, auto
oi [wa]: moi, le doigt, la boîte, une fois
eu or oeu [oe]: neuf, leur, jeune, la soeur, un oeuf
ai or ei [ɛ]: maison, j'avais, une chaise, la peine, la neige
gn [ɲ]: montagne, gagner, peigne
ill (or when final may be il) [j]: la famille, la fille, je travaille,
le travail

(Exceptions: ville, village, mille, tranquille [il])

You see here one of the major differences between French and English. In French, a fixed group of letters will usually have one sound and keep that one sound in different words. (Think of letter groups like "ough" in English, and of all the sounds that they may have.) In French, it is rare that a letter group changes its sound.)

↳ e.g., though vs rough

E. Word ending and gender: We have already mentioned that the final consonant is usually silent in French. There are several common word endings which have the same sound, although they have different spellings:

| | | |
|--------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| -er * | : papier, aller, marcher | } → have one sound: [e] |
| -et ** | : cabaret, ballet, poulet | |
| -ed | : pied, assied | |
| -ez | : nez, chez, avez | |

Also having the same sound is -es in: les, mes, tes, des, ses, ces ↑

The s of the plural, as we have seen, is silent unless it is followed by a word with which it must be linked: ils//parlent vs. ils arrivent

*-er: The above rule holds for all verb endings in -er and for other words ending in -er unless they are "short" words (usually one syllable), in which case the r is pronounced: la mer, le fer, fier, cher, and in amer.

** -et: -et has a closed e [e] sound except in the conjunction et [ɛ].

F. Gender: All nouns in French are either masculine or feminine. In some cases, the ending may indicate the gender:

| | | | |
|---------|---|-----------------------|-----------------|
| -er | : | le cahier, le papier | } are masculine |
| -et | : | le ballet, le cabinet | |
| -ed | : | le pied | |
| -ez | : | le nez | |
| -eau*** | : | Le chapeau, le gateau | |

two consonants: le banc, le renard, le temps, le restaurant }

vs.

| | | |
|--------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| -tion: | la soustraction, la multiplication | } are feminine |
| -té : | la beauté, la générosité, la charité | |

Often, but by no means always, a mute e ending indicates a feminine gender: la vache, la table, la porte, la fenêtre, la blouse, la robe, la chaise, la rose, etc.
(but: le livre, le beurre, etc.)

Note: A final e without an accent is always "silent" [ə]: je, que, il parle, je regarde, une, robe, blanche

***-eau. Exception: l'eau (water) and la peau (skin) are feminine.

G. The -ent ending of the 3rd pers. plur. of verbs is always silent:

ils parlent ils parlaient ils parleraient ils parlèrent