

French Fluency Accelerator
Workshop #6

Verbs &
Conjugation
101

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Introduction

Verbs and conjugation may be the most complex part of the French language. Native French speakers make mistakes with these all the time.

It's important to

- ✓ let go of the need for perfection
- ✓ keep using the tools you already have, such as the daily French bath and your vocabulary system

This workshop is meant to give you

- ✓ an overview of how verbs work,
- ✓ tools to be learn verbs & conjugations and use them accurately
- ✓ A few shortcuts that will make this easier for you

How to learn the verbs:

- ➡ Passive subconscious learning (a.k.a daily French bath) is still likely to be the easiest way for you to assimilate the verbs, tenses, and how they are used.
- ➡ I will also mention in this workbook the corresponding units in the Grammaire progressive du français, for each tense. You can do targeted exercises if you feel called to.

Part 1

What's a verb?

A verb

- is a particular 'kind of word' (substantive/noun, adjectives, adverbs, verbs...)
- expresses an action or a state (either something is happening or something/ someone is in a particular state)
- is the core of the sentence it's in.
- A sentence almost always contains at least one verb.
- A shape-shifting word: it will use any reason to change its form, including person, number, tense, mood, voice & any combination of these (more about all these later)

This "shape-shifting" is (mostly) referred to as **conjugation**.

⚠ Warning! a verb can occasionally masquerade as

- a noun/substantive

ex: Lire est agréable - Reading is enjoyable

(➡ In this case, the *infinitif* is used and is invariable)

- an adjective

ex: Les lettres trouvées ce matin - The letters found this morning

(➡ In this case, the *participes* are used and the rules that govern the adjectives apply)

Part 2

Conjugation basics

Conjugation (*conjugaison*) = the modification of a verb from its basic form.

Note: Modification of other words can never be referred to as "conjugation". We use other words instead such as "inflection" (*flexion*), "agreement" (*accord*), "declination" (*déclinaison*)

➡ A verb conjugates according to person and number.

In French, there are three persons and two numbers, presented in this chart:

↓ Person ↓ Number ➡	Singulier (singular)	Pluriel (plural)
Première personne (First person) The speaker/writer	Je (I)	Nous (we)
Deuxième personne (Second Person) The receiver	Tu (you/thou)	Vous (you)
Troisième personne (Third Person) Someone or something not taking part in the conversation	Il, elle (he, she, it, they)	Ils, elles (they)

A standard conjugation has six forms, three for the singular and three for the plural. It can happen that a conjugation has less than six forms, but there will never be more than six.

Note about tu & vous:

Tu = one person whom we address with familiarity (such as a friend, loved one or child)

Vous = several people or one person whom we address formally

When in doubt: use "vous" until the person tells you to use "tu" instead.

Part 3

How to conjugate verbs

A verb form is always composed of

- a root (radical)
- an ending (terminaison)

The root stays mostly the same (except for some irregular verbs)

The ending changes according to person and number (and more factors too)

This is what a regular conjugation looks like:

Je chant <u>e</u>	Verb : chanter
Tu chant <u>es</u>	Tense & mood : présent de l'indicatif
Il/ elle chant <u>e</u>	Group / type : 1st group
Nous chant <u>ons</u>	Root= chant-
Vous chant <u>ez</u>	Endings are in red
Ils/ elles chant <u>ent</u>	<u>Underlined letters are silent</u>

3.1 Verb groups & types

- Endings also change according to verb group & type. When you learn a verb, you need to also learn its group & type, lest you won't be able to conjugate it.
- To conjugate a verb, you need to know its group and/or type.
A verb always belongs to the same group & type. This doesn't change.
- In French, there are 3 groups and many types.

The 3 verb groups

1st group - Type = chanter Criterion: Infinitive ends in -er (exception: aller)	2nd group - Type = finir Criteria: Infinitive ends in -ir and some forms contain -iss- (no exception)	3rd group - Many types All other verbs, including aller.
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How to find a verb's type:

The book Bescherelle - La conjugaison pour tous contains all the information about every single French verb.

Here's how you find a verb's type in it:

- The last section of the book is a list of all French verbs, in alphabetical order. Look up the verb you need.
- Notice the blue number next to the verb. This is the type's number
- Turn to this number in the first section of the book to find the conjugation for this type.



Important irregular verbs

Irregular verbs have their own type. Some less frequent verbs may follow these irregular verb's type too.

In general, you can find conjugation charts (tableaux de conjugaison) for most frequent irregular verbs in any grammar book, typically towards the end.

➡ For example p154-157 in Grammaire progressive du français, niveau débutant.

✓ **Learn the most frequent verbs first.**

I recommend starting with Etre, Avoir, Aller, Faire, Prendre, Venir, Voir, Vouloir, Dire

3.2 Shortcut: the prefixes

Many French verbs are created by adding a prefix to a "main" verb. These new verbs follow the main verb's conjugation type.

Examples:

refaire, défaire, parfaire ➡ faire

remettre, démettre, promettre, permettre, transmettre ➡ mettre

revoir, prévoir ➡ voir

revenir, prévenir, parvenir, survenir ➡ venir

There is a limited number of possible prefixes.

You can find a list of common prefixes and their meaning at [this link](#).

✓ **Having a good understanding of the prefixes can help you save a lot of time when learning French, and particularly French verbs.**

Shortcut:

Can you use another verb?

When in a conversation (or whenever you need to be fast)

- If you don't know a specific verb, do you know one that has a similar meaning?
- If you know the verb but don't remember the conjugation, can you use a regular verb, or a verb you know (for example "faire") instead?

If all else fails

(and you have an internet access)

Google

"Conjugaison + YOUR VERB"

There are several sites that will give you the full conjugation of any verb you ask for. These sites will be at the top of the result page.

- ✓ Great to get a verb form when you're in a hurry
 - ✓ Great to find uncommon verbs that you rarely need
 - ✓ Can save you when writing an email.
 - ✗ Not really something you can do in the middle of a conversation.
 - ✗ Doesn't teach you how to conjugate or even give you the type.
 - ✗ Won't be allowed during an exam.
- ➡ Make sure you put some effort into learning the verbs so you need this solution less and less.

Part 4

The French tenses & moods system - a brief introduction

Tenses (les temps) refer to the moment in time we are speaking about (past, present, future)

4.1 Tenses

4.1.2 The present

Le présent (de l'indicatif) is the first tense you learn and by far the most common in French

Expresses that

- something is happening now
- something is always true
- can also be used to speak about the past or the future.

Aspects?

In English, **Aspect** is a grammatical category that expresses how an action, event, or state, denoted by a tense extends over time."

➡ **There are no aspect in French.**

However, English speakers often make mistakes, as they try to translate literally from English into French.

➡ When a situation is ongoing (such as having been married for a while and still being married) then we use the present in French.

"I have been married for twenty years" becomes

✅ Je suis marié.e depuis vingt ans.

❌ J'ai été marié.e pendant vingt ans. ← This would be the passé composé, indicating that the situation is over.

4.1.3 The past

4.1.3.1 Le passé composé

- Expresses an action or situation that is now over.

Is composed of

- an auxiliary verb (avoir or être)
- the participe passé of the main verb.

4.1.3.2 Passé composé & imparfait

The two main tenses used to speak in the past

Imparfait = describing the context or talking about things that repeatedly happened in the past.

Passé composé = specific actions that happened (once or at least not routinely)

4.1.4 The future

Contrary to English, French has a full tense to talk in the future ("futur simple de l'indicatif"). This means more conjugation to learn.

If you don't know this conjugation yet, you can use the so-called "futur proche" or "futur composé" instead:

Aller (in the present) + infinitif of the verb

ex: Je vais apprendre le français

4.2 Moods (modes)

The indicative

All tenses we have spoken about so far belong to the so called "indicative mood" (mode indicatif).

The Indicative mood is mostly used to refer to things that are real, to describe a reality that's current, past or expected future, as well as a person's actual feelings.

There are several more moods.

➡ The use cases of most moods is similar to those of "modal verbs" in English. "would, should, might, may etc."

Good news:

There are way less moods in French than modal verbs in English.

Bad news:

Each moods comes with entirely new conjugations and at least two tenses each.

4.2.1 Conditional (conditionnel)

The conditional is used to:

- express the consequence of a condition
- be polite (je voudrais...)
- express the future in a past context

➡ It has 2 tenses (present & past)

Note: Grammarians do not agree on whether the conditionnel is a mood or merely extra tenses of the indicative.

4.2.2 Subjunctive (Subjonctif)

The subjunctive is traditionally considered to express things that are unreal or subjective.

➡ It has 4 tenses in total (présent, passé, imparfait, plus que parfait. However, only the présent is frequently used. The passé is occasionally used. The other two are just irrelevant and you shouldn't bother with them.

➡ The subjunctive also has many irregular conjugations.

4.2.3 Imperative (Impératif)

The imperative is used to give orders, advice or instructions

- ➔ it has two tenses (présent & passé)
- ➔ it only exists in 2nd person (singular & plural) & 1st person plural

4.2.4 Impersonal moods

French also has two “impersonal moods”.

These do not conjugate according to person.

4.2.4.1 Infinitive (infinitif)

Infinitif présent is how we refer to a particular verb most of the time (ex: être, avoir, aller). It has several uses, including when we use a verb as a noun.

- ➔ The infinitive has two tenses (présent & passé) and only one form for each tense.

4.2.4.2 Participle (Participe)

The participles are used in compound tenses (such as passé composé)

They often behave like an adjective (agrees in gender & number) and they can be used as an adjective too.

They have two tenses (présent & passé) and only one form (for each tense). However the participe passé will often agree in gender and number with the subject or object of the verb, or the noun it qualifies

4.3 Active & Passive voice

All the examples we have given in this workshop are in the so called “active voice” (voix active), where the grammatical subject is active, as the “doer”, and the grammatical object is passive.

ex: Le chat mange la souris.

The cat eats the mouse.


There is also a passive voice (voix passive)

In the passive voice, the grammatical subject is passive (so, the object or receiver of the action)

This voice is created by using “être” in the corresponding tense + the participe passé

Ex: La souris **est mangée** par le chat.

The mouse **is eaten** by the cat.

 The passive voice is quite rare in French.

Key take aways

- ❌ Do not seek to master all the verbs, tenses & moods.
- ✅ Instead, focus on the most important ones
- ✅ The (indicative) present is a good place to start
- ✅ Only seek to learn more tenses, moods & verbs once you feel you have an ok grasp of what you've already learned
- ❌ Don't let yourself be overwhelmed by all of this.
- ✅ Remember that the French frequently get their verbs wrong too, and they're still fluent.

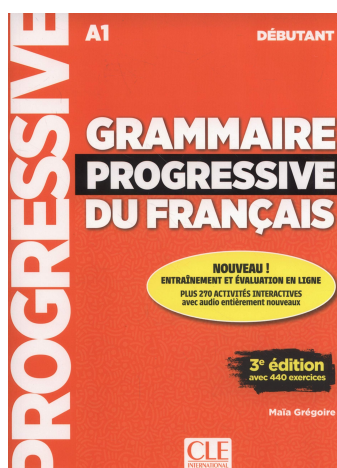
When learning a verb, also learn

- ✅ verb group/type (If it's own type, learn the entire conjugation)
- For intermediate students:
- ✅ whether "être" or "avoir" is its auxiliary verb
- For advanced students:
- ✅ If it accepts an object
 - ✅ If it comes with (a) preposition(s) and which one(s)

What now?

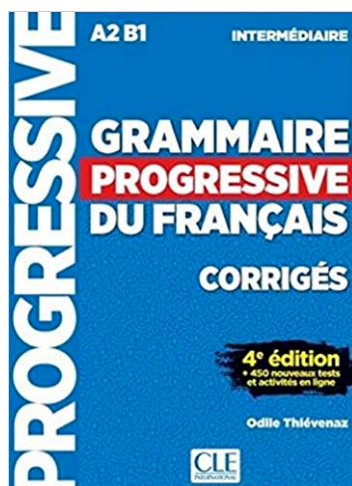
- ➔ Keep up your daily French bath & vocabulary habits. These will help you assimilate the verbs without getting overwhelmed.
- ➔ When you write a verb in your notebook or flashcards, make sure to indicate the type too.
- ➔ You can get a Bescherelle to help you with finding types and understanding more about conjugation.
- ➔ **You can do targeted exercises to consolidate your knowledge of any tense**

Here are the corresponding units in your grammar books:



In Grammaire progressive du français, niveau débutant

Le présent - Units 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 19, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42,
Le passé composé: Unit 44, 45, 46, 54
L'imparfait: Unit 47
Le futur proche (avec aller): Unit 43
Le futur: Unit 48
Summary of present, past & future: Unit 49



In Grammaire progressive du français, niveau intermédiaire

Le présent: Unit 16, 17, 23, 26, 27
Le futur simple: Unit 47
Le futur proche: Unit 39
Le passé composé: Unit 40
L'imparfait: Unit 43
Le conditionnel: Unit 30, 49
Le subjonctif: Unit 51
L'impératif: Unit 29
La voix passive: unit 42

Resources & Links

Books:

Bescherelle - La conjugaison pour tous

Grammaire progressive du français, niveau débutant

Grammaire progressive du français, niveau intermédiaire

Conjugation websites

<https://m.bescherelle.com/>

<https://www.the-conjugation.com/>

<https://leconjugueur.lefigaro.fr/>

<https://www.toutelaconjugaison.com/>

<https://conjugaison.lemonde.fr/>

<http://www.conjugaison.com/>

Videos:

Serious:

[An overview of all tenses in 15-minutes by Français avec Pierre \(in French\)](#)

Fun:

[A fake-movie trailer, featuring conjugation mistakes in every verb, "C'est pas ce que vous croivez, un film de Peter Bescherelle"](#)

This video dates back to the beginning of the 2000s (early days of internet videos, even before Youtube was a big thing). Its existence and popularity is a testimony to how difficult yet important the verbs are to the French, as well as the Bescherelle book itself, which gave its name to this fake movie's fake director.

How many mistakes can you spot in it?

