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un nom

un verbe

un adjectif

un pronom

Véronique Mazet, PhD

Adjunct professor of French

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by Véronique Mazet, PhD

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French Grammar For Dummies®

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Dedication

To my students of all ages: Thanks for believing in the beauty of the French language, and thanks for trusting me.

Author's Acknowledgments

Thanks to my agent, Grace Freedson, for calling me, and to my husband, for his super support.

Publisher's Acknowledgments

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Contents at a Glance

Introduction	1
Part I: Getting Started with French Grammar	5
Chapter 1: French Grammar in a Nutshell	7
Chapter 2: Sounding Out French Words	17
Chapter 3: Using Nouns and Determiners	35
Chapter 4: Describing Nouns with Adjectives.....	55
Chapter 5: Dealing with Numbers, Dates, and Times.....	69
Part II: Constructing Sentences, Saying No, and Asking Questions	85
Chapter 6: Acquainting Yourself with the Present Tense	87
Chapter 7: Acting on Oneself and on Each Other: Pronominal Verbs	107
Chapter 8: Just Say No: Negative Words and Phrases	119
Chapter 9: Handling Questions and Exclamations	131
Part III: Beefing Up Your Sentences	155
Chapter 10: Saying Where, When, and How with Adverbs.....	157
Chapter 11: Picking Up Prepositions.....	171
Chapter 12: It's All Relative: Making Comparisons.....	187
Chapter 13: Using Pronouns.....	203
Chapter 14: Adding the Gerund and the Passive to Your Repertoire.....	227
Part IV: Talking about the Past or Future	237
Chapter 15: Noting Past Actions with the Present Perfect.....	239
Chapter 16: Reminiscing and Describing Ongoing Past Actions with the Imperfect	253
Chapter 17: Projecting Forward with the Future	265
Part V: Expressing Conditions, Subjectivity, and Orders	283
Chapter 18: Wondering with the Conditional.....	285
Chapter 19: Surveying the Subjunctive.....	301
Chapter 20: Giving Orders with the Imperative	319
Chapter 21: Discovering Compound Tenses	333
Part VI: The Part of Tens	341
Chapter 22: Ten Common French Grammar Mistakes (And How to Avoid Them).....	343
Chapter 23: Ten (Or So) Useful French Idioms	349
Index	353

Table of Contents

***Introduction* 1**

About This Book.....	1
Conventions Used in This Book.....	1
What You're Not to Read.....	2
Foolish Assumptions.....	2
How This Book Is Organized.....	2
Part I: Getting Started with French Grammar.....	3
Part II: Constructing Sentences, Saying No, and Asking Questions.....	3
Part III: Beefing Up Your Sentences.....	3
Part IV: Talking about the Past or Future.....	3
Part V: Expressing Conditions, Subjectivity, and Orders.....	3
Part VI: The Part of Tens.....	4
Icons Used in This Book.....	4
Where to Go from Here.....	4

***Part 1: Getting Started with French Grammar* 5**

Chapter 1: French Grammar in a Nutshell 7

The Parts of Speech.....	7
Nouns.....	7
Articles.....	8
Adjectives.....	8
Verbs.....	8
Conjunctions.....	9
Adverbs.....	9
Prepositions.....	10
Pronouns.....	10
The Basics of Composing Sentences.....	11
Starting with a conjugated verb.....	11
Adding details.....	12
Fun Stuff You Can Do with Your Sentences.....	12
Going negative.....	12
Asking questions.....	13
Making comparisons.....	13
Many Tenses and Moods.....	13
The past.....	14
The future.....	14
The conditional.....	14
The subjunctive.....	15
The imperative.....	15
Compound tenses.....	16



Chapter 2: Sounding Out French Words	17
Starting with Vowels	18
Pronouncing individual vowels.....	18
Combining vowels.....	19
Handling nasal sounds	20
Considering Consonants.....	21
Conquering a few individual consonants.....	22
Mixing consonants.....	23
Focusing on final consonants	24
Working with Accents and the Cedilla.....	25
Checking out different types of accent marks	25
Adding the cedilla.....	26
Making Your French Sound Polished with the Liaison.....	27
Knowing when you have to use the liaison	28
Figuring out when you shouldn't use the liaison.....	29
Surveying Stress and Syllables	30
Keeping stress out of French words.....	30
Breaking words and sentences into syllables	30
Answer Key.....	32
Chapter 3: Using Nouns and Determiners	35
Finding the Gender of Nouns	35
Identifying masculine nouns.....	36
Recognizing feminine nouns.....	37
Fixing on nouns with fixed gender.....	38
Deriving feminine nouns from their masculine counterparts.....	39
Making Nouns Plural	40
Applying a simple rule.....	40
Examining a few oddballs	40
Using Articles to Help You with Nouns' Gender.....	42
Delving into definite articles.....	42
Discovering indefinite articles	44
Assessing partitive articles.....	46
Selecting the correct article	47
Expressing Possession.....	48
Considering common possessives	48
Discovering other ways to express possession.....	50
Pointing at Things with Demonstratives	50
Introducing Things and People.....	51
Using c'est and ce sont	52
Knowing what to do with il/elle est	52
Answer Key.....	54
Chapter 4: Describing Nouns with Adjectives	55
The Agreement: Matching Adjectives to the Nouns They Describe	55
Forming the feminine singular from the masculine singular.....	55
Forming the plural from the singular	57
Examining Irregular Adjectives.....	58
Dealing with irregular feminine singular endings.....	58
Getting a handle on irregular plural endings	61

Knowing the Proper Place of Adjectives	62
Adjectives that go after the nouns they describe.....	62
Adjectives that go before the nouns they describe	62
Changing the meaning of an adjective by changing its place	63
Answer Key.....	66
Chapter 5: Dealing with Numbers, Dates, and Times	69
Counting from Zero to a Billion: Cardinal Numbers.....	69
From 0 to 16.....	69
From 17 to 69.....	70
From 70 to 99.....	71
The big leagues: 100 and beyond.....	72
A few guidelines for using cardinal numbers	73
Putting Things in Order: Ordinal Numbers	73
Discussing Quantities.....	74
Specific expressions of quantities	74
Food-related expressions of quantities.....	75
Talking about Days, Months, Seasons, and Dates	76
Days of the week	76
Months and seasons.....	77
Specific dates.....	78
Telling Time.....	79
Using the 12-hour clock.....	79
Using the 24-hour clock.....	81
Answer Key.....	82

Part II: Constructing Sentences, Saying No, and Asking Questions **85**

Chapter 6: Acquainting Yourself with the Present Tense	87
Understanding French Verb Fundamentals	87
Starting with subject pronouns.....	88
Introducing infinitives and conjugations	90
Conjugating Regular Verbs.....	91
Taking on -er verbs	91
Investigating -ir verbs.....	92
Working with -re verbs.....	92
Dealing with a Few Moody Regular -er Verbs	93
Verbs that end in -cer and -ger.....	93
Verbs that end in -yer.....	94
Verbs that double their final consonant	95
Verbs that end in e/é + consonant + -er	95
Tackling Irregular Verbs	96
Revealing oddball -ir verbs	96
Conquering the fatal four: être, avoir, aller, and faire.....	99
Handling even more irregular verbs.....	100
Answer Key.....	106

Chapter 7: Acting on Oneself and on Each Other: Pronominal Verbs	107
Introducing Pronominal Verbs in the Present Tense	107
Discovering reflexive pronouns	108
Putting together a reflexive pronoun and a verb.....	108
Dealing with stem-changing pronominal verbs	109
Mirror, Mirror: Acting on Oneself with Reflexive Verbs	110
Back and Forth: Expressing Reciprocal Actions.....	112
Talking about communication	113
Making your own reciprocal verbs.....	114
Idiomatic Verbs: Expressing Neither Oneself nor Each Other	115
Answer Key.....	117
Chapter 8: Just Say No: Negative Words and Phrases	119
Discovering the Basics of Negative Words and Phrases	119
Starting with a few common negative words and phrases.....	119
Making a double negative	120
Building a triple negative	121
Using negative expressions by themselves	122
Keeping a Few Handy Guidelines for Negatives in Mind	122
Talking about quantities in negative ways	123
Negating an infinitive.....	124
Dealing with a verb plus a preposition	124
Handling object pronouns	124
Using negative words as subjects.....	125
Knowing rules for neither/nor.....	126
Responding Negatively	127
Answer Key.....	130
Chapter 9: Handling Questions and Exclamations	131
Composing and Answering Yes/No Questions	131
Using est-ce que	132
Using inversion.....	133
Answering a yes/no question	137
Asking for Specific Information with Question Words.....	138
Useful French question words	138
The basics of using question words.....	139
Discovering the Various Ways of Asking “What”	141
Untangling qu’est-ce que and qu’est-ce qui.....	141
Knowing when to use quel.....	142
Asking “Who?”	144
“Who” as the subject.....	144
“Who” as the object.....	145
Including Prepositions in Questions	146
A preposition plus “who”	146
A preposition plus “what”	146
Expressing Surprise and Enthusiasm with Exclamations	148
Including a noun.....	149
Including just an adjective.....	149
Answer Key.....	151

Part III: Beefing Up Your Sentences..... 155
Chapter 10: Saying Where, When, and How with Adverbs 157

When, Where, and How Much: Getting to Know Adverbs of Time, Place, and Quantity	157
Adverbs of time.....	158
Adverbs of place	159
Adverbs of quantity.....	159
That's the Way: Examining Adverbs of Manner	161
Forming regular adverbs of manner.....	161
Recognizing and forming irregular adverbs of manner	163
Knowing when no adverb of manner can work	165
Putting Adverbs in Their Place.....	165
With verbs in a simple tense.....	165
With verbs in the near future tense.....	166
With verbs in a compound tense.....	166
With adjectives and other adverbs	166
In the end: Certain adverbs of time.....	167
Answer Key.....	168

Chapter 11: Picking Up Prepositions 171

Introducing the Basics of Prepositions.....	171
Presenting common prepositions.....	171
Using common prepositions properly	173
Figuring Out Some Tricky Prepositions.....	176
Examining à.....	176
Understanding de.....	178
A Geography Lesson: Using Prepositions with Destinations and Locations	181
Dealing with a preposition + a city.....	181
Handling a preposition + a state or a country.....	182
Answer Key.....	184

Chapter 12: It's All Relative: Making Comparisons 187

Comparing Two Elements: The Basics	187
Using three basic types of comparisons.....	187
Understanding unusual comparisons	189
More or Less: Using Adjectives and Adverbs in Comparisons.....	189
Comparisons with adjectives	189
Comparisons with adverbs.....	192
Good Stuff: Comparing Quantities.....	193
Quantities of an item	194
Quantities of an action	194
Stressed Out: Using Stress Pronouns in a Comparison.....	195
The Best of All: Superlatives	196
Superlatives with adjectives.....	196
Superlatives with adverbs and quantities	199
Answer Key.....	201

Chapter 13: Using Pronouns	203
Digging into Direct Object Pronouns	203
Meeting the direct object pronouns	203
Knowing when to use direct object pronouns	205
Writing a sentence with a direct object pronoun	205
Investigating Indirect Object Pronouns	206
Introducing the indirect object pronouns	206
Knowing the verbs that require an indirect object	206
Putting together a sentence with an indirect object pronoun	208
Working with Pronouns that Replace Phrases	209
Using <i>y</i> to replace a variety of prepositional phrases	209
Using <i>en</i> to replace expressions of quantities and certain prepositional phrases	211
Positioning Pronouns Properly	214
In affirmative and negative sentences	214
In a sentence that has more than one verb	216
In a sentence in the <i>passé composé</i>	216
In affirmative and negative commands	217
In a sentence or command that needs two pronouns	218
Staying Strong with Stress Pronouns	220
Replacing a noun	220
Reinforcing a noun	221
Answer Key	223
 Chapter 14: Adding the Gerund and the Passive to Your Repertoire	 227
While Doing Something: The Gerund	227
Comparing gerunds in English and French	227
Forming present participles	228
Creating and knowing when to use gerunds	229
Building Sentences in a Different Way: The Passive Construction	231
Pairing <i>être</i> with a past participle in a passive construction	232
Uncovering the mysterious agent	234
Answer Key	235
 Part IV: Talking about the Past or Future	 237
Chapter 15: Noting Past Actions with the Present Perfect	239
Forming the Past Participle	239
Regular past participles	240
Irregular past participles	241
Adding the Auxiliaries <i>Être</i> and <i>Avoir</i>	242
Entering the house of <i>être</i>	242
Conjugating everything else with <i>avoir</i>	245
Considering verbs that can take either <i>être</i> or <i>avoir</i>	247
Using the <i>Passé Composé</i> Correctly	249
Knowing the basic uses	249
Saying no	249
Answer Key	251

Chapter 16: Reminiscing and Describing Ongoing Past Actions with the Imperfect 253

Forming the Imperfect Properly	253
Getting acquainted with imperfect endings	253
Working with verbs ending in -cer and -ger.....	255
Tackling verbs with irregular stems in the present tense.....	257
Forming the imperfect of être	258
Putting the Imperfect to Work in Everyday Situations	258
Talking about past habits	258
Telling a story.....	260
Noting continuous past actions	261
Discussing hypothetical situations	262
Offering suggestions.....	262
Answer Key.....	264

Chapter 17: Projecting Forward with the Future 265

Forming the Simple Future Tense of Regular Verbs	265
The future tense of -er and -ir verbs.....	265
The future tense of -re verbs	267
Dealing with Irregular Forms of the Simple Future Tense.....	268
Creating the future tense of -yer and -ayer verbs	268
Handling appeler and jeter in the future.....	269
Knowing what to do with verbs ending in e/é + consonant + -er.....	270
Introducing verbs with a completely irregular stem in the future.....	271
Exploring Other Ways of Talking about the Future	273
Adding expressions of time	273
Combining aller and an infinitive when the future is certain.....	275
Using the present tense in certain cases	276
Discovering Other Uses of the Future Tense	277
Describing a cause-effect relationship	277
Expressing what you'll do when something else happens	278
Discussing hopes and predictions.....	279
Answer Key.....	280

Part V: Expressing Conditions, Subjectivity, and Orders..... 283

Chapter 18: Wondering with the Conditional 285

Forming the Conditional of Regular Verbs.....	285
Regular -er and -ir verbs.....	285
Regular -re verbs.....	286
Tackling Irregular Forms in the Conditional.....	287
Verbs ending in -yer and -ayer	287
The verbs appeler and jeter	288
Verbs ending in e/é plus a consonant plus -er.....	289
Verbs with completely different stems in the conditional.....	290

Knowing When to Use the Conditional	292
Daydreaming about different situations	292
Giving friendly advice.....	294
Making a polite request.....	294
Expressing offers and wishes	295
Discussing the future in a past context.....	296
Answer Key.....	298
Chapter 19: Surveying the Subjunctive	301
Familiarizing Yourself with Subjunctive Forms	302
Forming the subjunctive of regular verbs	302
Creating irregular subjunctive conjugations.....	304
Recognizing Phrases That Trigger the Subjunctive.....	307
Expressing wants, needs, and advice.....	308
Discussing feelings about what's happening	309
Showing doubt	311
Keeping the Number of Subjects in Mind.....	312
Sticking with the subjunctive in two-subject sentences.....	312
Using the infinitive rather than the subjunctive in one-subject sentences.....	313
Avoiding a Few Pitfalls	314
Picking out false triggers.....	314
Staying aware of turncoat verbs	315
Answer Key.....	316
Chapter 20: Giving Orders with the Imperative	319
Making Affirmative Commands.....	319
Grasping the three forms	319
Forming the imperative of regular verbs	320
Introducing irregular forms	322
Dealing with pronominal verbs.....	325
Forming Negative Commands	327
Adding an Object Pronoun to Your Command.....	328
In affirmative commands	328
In negative commands	329
Answer Key.....	331
Chapter 21: Discovering Compound Tenses	333
A Long Time Ago: The Pluperfect.....	334
Back to the Future: The Future Perfect	335
Missed Opportunities: The Past Conditional.....	336
Reacting to the Past: The Past Subjunctive	338
Answer Key.....	340

Part VI: The Part of Tens..... 341**Chapter 22: Ten Common French Grammar Mistakes
(And How to Avoid Them) 343**

Using Definite Articles Incorrectly	343
Confusing Indefinite and Partitive Articles	344
Using the Wrong Word for “Time”	344
Incorrectly Translating Means of Transportation	344
Trying to Find an Equivalent for the -ing Verb Form in French.....	345
Using Possessives with Pronominal Verbs to Refer to Body Parts.....	345
Putting the Wrong Verb Form after Avoir or Être	346
Mixing Up Similar Verbs	346
Confusing Connaître and Savoir	347
Being Tricked by False Cognates.....	347

Chapter 23: Ten (Or So) Useful French Idioms 349

Faire le pont	349
Ce n’est pas la mer à boire	350
Ça me prend la tête	350
Faire la tête.....	350
Avoir la gueule de bois	350
Comme un cheveu sur la soupe.....	351
Au pif	351
Donner sa langue au chat	351
Être sur les charbons ardents.....	351
Bête comme ses pieds	352
Tirer le diable par la queue.....	352

Index..... 353

Introduction

Ideas, needs, and feelings are expressed with words. If you want to express yourself in any language, you need to know the right words, but words alone are not enough. If I say **dehors** (*outside*) to you, you can't guess if I want you *to go outside, look outside*, or something else. I need to add a verb like **allez** (*go*) and use it in the correct way to make my meaning clear.

In order to put words together in a coherent way, you need grammar. Unlike the English language, in which you can often string words together with minimum linking, French requires more formal structure. In this book I show you how the parts of French grammar work together so you can express what you need, how you feel, and even what you think, in French.

About This Book

French Grammar For Dummies tackles specific French grammar topics in detail, with plenty of examples and practice problems. An answer key at the end of each chapter allows you to check your work.

I start you off with basic French grammar on nouns, articles, adjectives, numbers, dates, and times. Then you move to verbs so you can build simple sentences in the present tense. From that point, you find out how to embellish simple French sentences with more detailed phrasing that makes you sound like a native speaker, thanks to adverbs, prepositional phrases, and pronouns. Then you're ready to move in time with different verb tenses, like the past and the future.

You don't have to read this book from cover to cover; you can simply read the sections or chapters that interest you. Put the book away until you need it again — it'll be ready and waiting for you!

Conventions Used in This Book

I use the following conventions to make this book easier for you to navigate:

- ✔ French words and sentences appear in **boldface**.
- ✔ English equivalents in *italics* follow French words and sentences.
- ✔ I usually present the English equivalent of French expressions, which is not always the literal translation. For example, you can translate the French phrase **de rien** literally as *of nothing*, but in English, the correct equivalent is *you're welcome*. This book usually gives you the *you're welcome* version of the translation, but in some spots, I provide the literal translation as well.
- ✔ An answer key at the end of every chapter provides the correct answers to all the practice questions in the chapter.

To make verbs stand out, I usually present verb conjugations in tables like this one:

<i>aimer (to like, to love)</i>	
j'aime	nous aimons
tu aimes	vous aimez
il/elle/on aime	ils/elles aiment

The top of the table notes a French verb and its English translation, followed by six verb forms that vary according to who or what is performing the action: *I; you* (singular informal); *he, she, or one; we; you* (singular formal or plural formal and informal); and *they* (masculine and feminine plural).

Note: This book doesn't feature pronunciations after French text (with the exception of Chapter 2, which is about sounding out French words). It concentrates on grammar and written communication. Be sure to check out a French dictionary for any pronunciation questions you have.

What You're Not to Read

If you don't have a lot of time, or if you need more help with certain grammatical topics, you can skip around to stuff that most interests you. For instance, if you're already familiar with the gender of nouns but would like to put them in action with verbs, skip directly to Chapter 6.

If you know right away what an exercise wants you to do, you can skip the examples and just dive into the exercise questions themselves. Also, if I present several examples to illustrate a particular grammar rule and you understand the rule after reading the first example, you don't need to bother with the rest of them. After all, this book is here to help you go at your own pace.

Foolish Assumptions

As I wrote this book, I made the following assumptions about you, dear reader:

- ✔ You want to be able to communicate more creatively in French, especially in writing — even if you already have a background in French and can carry on a conversation.
- ✔ You want to practice French grammar so you can be sure you can retain your newly acquired knowledge.
- ✔ You love French and find grammar fascinating . . . maybe?

How This Book Is Organized

French Grammar For Dummies is divided into six parts. The following sections introduce the parts and their contents.

Part I: Getting Started with French Grammar

This part is for beginners, or those of you who want a brief refresher on French basics. Here you find out how to pronounce French words; handle gender and number with nouns, articles, and adjectives; practice counting and telling time; and brush up on dates, days of the week, and months of the year.

Part II: Constructing Sentences, Saying No, and Asking Questions

In this part you find out how to put together a subject and a verb in the present tense to create a basic sentence, express reflexive or mutual actions with pronominal verbs like **se lever** (*to get up*) and **se parler** (*to talk to each other*), say *no* using words like **jamais** (*never*) and **rien** (*nothing*), and ask questions.

Part III: Beefing Up Your Sentences

In this part, I explain how to make sentences more informative by adding adverbs and prepositional phrases. You discover how to compare all kinds of things and how to replace nouns with pronouns to avoid repetition. And you find out how to use gerunds to explain how something is done and use the passive to insist on the doing rather than the doer of an action.

Part IV: Talking about the Past or Future

In these chapters I show you how you can move a sentence in time by changing the conjugation of the verb from present tense to past tense and future tense. French has many more verb tenses than this book covers, but I limit the tenses to the ones that you're the most likely to use daily. Here I focus on the present perfect, the imperfect, and the future.

Part V: Expressing Conditions, Subjectivity, and Orders

In this part, I present the conditional, the subjunctive, and the imperative.

- ✔ Conditional statements go something like this: **Je viendrais avec toi si j'avais le temps.** (*I would come with you if I had time.*) The conditional allows you to express a daydream, a wish, or a hypothetical situation.
- ✔ The subjunctive and its triggers allow you to express surprise, fear, or joy at something. For example: **Nous sommes contents que vous veniez nous voir.** (*We are happy that you're coming to see us.*)
- ✔ The imperative is what you need to give orders or forbid things, just like signs you see in a park: **Ne marchez pas sur la pelouse.** (*Don't walk on the grass.*)

As a bonus in this part, I explain how to use the auxiliary verbs **avoir** (*to have*) and **être** (*to be*) to form tenses called *compound tenses* like the pluperfect, the future perfect, and the past conditional.

Part VI: The Part of Tens

Every *For Dummies* book has a Part of Tens — why break with tradition? In this part, you find ten typical French grammar mistakes (and how to avoid them) and a list of ten French idioms to help you sound like a native French speaker.

Icons Used in This Book



The following icons make certain kinds of information easier for you to find.

This icon points out information that you should recall long after you finish reading this book. If you read anything here, it should be the text marked with this icon.



This icon highlights pointers for understanding French grammar quickly and more easily.



This icon points to the pitfalls of French grammar — beware!



This icon highlights practice problems that you can use to sharpen your French grammar skills.

Where to Go from Here

Beginners and anyone else who wants a refresher on French grammar basics can start with Chapter 2, on sounding out French words, or Chapter 5 on numbers, dates, and times. Chapters 3 and 4 help you make sure your nouns, articles, and adjectives all agree in gender (masculine or feminine) and number (one or more than one). If you're ready to start composing sentences, jump to Chapter 6, where you'll find out how to put subjects and verbs together.

Otherwise, feel free to dive in wherever you'd like. Every chapter is a stand-alone module. The more modules you complete, the more fluent you'll become in French grammar. **Bonne chance** (*good luck*)!

Part I
**Getting Started with
French Grammar**



In this part . . .

- ✔ Discover how to sound out French words.
- ✔ Get the scoop on nouns, including their gender and the articles to use with them.
- ✔ Match adjectives to the nouns they describe and place them properly in sentences.
- ✔ Start counting with cardinal and ordinal numbers, and then talk about dates and times.

Chapter 1

French Grammar in a Nutshell

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting to know French parts of speech
- ▶ Building and embellishing sentences
- ▶ Moving through verb tenses and moods

French grammar is somewhat complex, and this book gives you plenty of material to dig into, little by little. I start you off easy in this chapter, providing an overview of what's to come so you'll feel a little more familiar with the topics throughout the book. If you take the time to read this chapter, you get a good grammar primer to help you through the journey you're about to embark on.

The Parts of Speech

Learning a language is easier if you know what it's made of. To grasp the fundamentals of any language, your native language as well as French, you need to recognize the *parts of speech*, the various types of words that compose a language and how they work. The following sections give you the scoop.



Nouns

You should know three essential things about a French **nom** (*noun*):

- ✔ It refers to people, places, things, or concepts.
- ✔ It has a gender (masculine, *he*, or feminine, *she*), and a number (singular or plural). You need to know the noun's characteristics to make other elements of a sentence match it. That's called *agreement in gender and number*.
- ✔ It can have different roles (called *functions*) in a sentence:
 - It can be the *subject* of the verb, as the noun **professeur** in this sentence: **Le professeur parle.** (*The professor speaks.*)
 - It can be the *object* of the verb, as the noun **lune** in: **Nous regardons la lune.** (*We watch the moon.*)

See Chapter 3 for full details on French nouns.

Articles

An *article* (**un article**) is a small but essential little word that introduces a noun and takes its gender and number. Articles come in three types:

- ✔ The definite articles: **le**, **la**, **l'**, and **les** (*the*). For example: **les enfants** (*the children*).
- ✔ The indefinite articles: **un** and **une** (*a/an*), **des** (*some*), and **de** and **d'** (*no/not any*). For example: **un chat** (*a cat*).
- ✔ The partitive articles: **du**, **de la**, **de l'**, and **des** (*some*). For example, **de l'eau** (*some water*).

Chapter 3 covers these articles in more detail and explains how to choose the correct article for any sentence.



Adjectives

An adjective adds some color to a noun. For example: **un étudiant sérieux** (*a hard-working student*). To use **les adjectifs** correctly in French, you need to know a couple of things:

- ✔ An adjective is a chameleon; it changes to match the noun it describes. It can be masculine singular, masculine plural, feminine singular, or feminine plural. Matching an adjective to the noun it describes is called the *agreement* of the adjective.
- ✔ Most French adjectives are placed after a noun, not before like in English. For example you say **une voiture rouge** (*a red car*). **Rouge** (*red*) goes after **voiture** (*car*).

Get the lowdown on adjectives in Chapter 4.

Verbs

Verbs (**les verbes**) are the core element of a sentence because they provide essential information. They take many different forms to do so. They indicate:

- ✔ What action is being performed, through the choice of the infinitive
- ✔ Who performs it, through the choice of the subject
- ✔ When it is performed, through the choice of the tense

Identifying the infinitive

The *infinitive* is like the name of the verb. It also tells you the type of a verb: regular verbs are grouped into three types, according to the ending of their infinitive. They are:

- ✔ Verbs ending in **-er**, like **parler** (*to talk*)
- ✔ Verbs ending in **-ir**, like **finir** (*to finish*)
- ✔ Verbs ending in **-re**, like **vendre** (*to sell*)

And then there are the irregular verbs, like **avoir** (*to have*), **aller** (*to go*), **faire** (*to do, to make*), and **être** (*to be*), to name only a few. These verbs follow different patterns when they're

conjugated (changed to reflect the subject and tense). (See the later section “Starting with a conjugated verb” for more information.)

Establishing subject-verb agreement

To start putting a verb into action (to conjugate it) you need a *subject* (who or what is doing the action). In French, you always say who the subject is, except in commands (English is the same way).

Each subject corresponds to a matching form of the verb. These differences in the forms happen at the end of the verb itself. For example, you say **tu chantes** (*you* [singular informal] *sing*) but **nous chantons** (*we sing*), changing the form of the verb on the ending, according to the subject.

Moving an action in time

An action can be expressed in a variety of tenses, such as the past tense, future tense, conditional tense, and many more. Here are some examples of different tenses for **parler** (*to speak*):

- ✔ Present: **nous parlons** (*we speak/are speaking*)
- ✔ Imperfect: **nous parlions** (*we used to speak*)
- ✔ Future: **nous parlerons** (*we will speak*)

Tenses come in two types: *simple tenses* and *compound tenses*.

- ✔ A simple tense is a one-word verb form, like **vous parlez** (*you speak*).
- ✔ A compound tense involves two words, like **tu as parlé** (*you spoke*).

Some tenses express a mood, like the conditional and the subjunctive. But to simplify, you can just look at those so-called moods as other tenses. See the later section “Many Tenses and Moods” for more information.

Conjunctions

Conjunctions (**les conjonctions**) are small invariable words used to link parts of a sentence or just words. For instance, in **Tu sors ou tu rentres?** (*Are you going out or are you coming in?*), **ou** (*or*) is a conjunction.

Adverbs

An *adverb* (**un adverbe**) is a little word that can modify a verb (usually), an adjective, or another adverb by telling you how the action in question is done: *slowly, quickly, seriously* (**lentement, vite, sérieusement**). Here’s an example of what adverbs can do to a sentence:

- ✔ Without adverbs: **Julie parle et Paul écoute.** (*Julie talks and Paul listens.*)
- ✔ With adverbs: **Julie parle lentement et Paul écoute attentivement.** (*Julie talks slowly and Paul listens attentively.*)

Get the scoop on adverbs in Chapter 10.

Prepositions

A **préposition** (*preposition*) is a little word placed between a verb and a noun or between two nouns to indicate a relationship of space/direction, time, or manner. A preposition introduces a prepositional phrase that adds information to the sentence, as in **Nous allons au cinéma** (*We go to the movies*). In this example, **au** is the preposition.



A French preposition keeps its meaning, no matter what surrounds it, unlike English prepositions that can adopt a different meaning with different verbs. For instance, the English preposition *after* indicates time — unless you join it to the verb *to look*, and *to look after* has nothing to do with time!

Check out Chapter 11 for help with using prepositions.

Pronouns

A pronoun (**un pronom**) can replace a noun when you want to avoid repetition. A pronoun is also a chameleon word that must match not only the gender (most of the time) and number of the noun it replaces but also its *function* in the sentence: subject or object. Here's a list of all the pronoun types you may come across in this book:

- ✓ The *subject pronouns* precede a conjugated verb, like this: **tu parles** (*you speak*) and **nous écoutons** (*we listen*). They are **je** (*I*), **tu** (*you* [singular informal]), **il** (*he*), **elle** (*she*), **on** (*one*), **nous** (*we*), **vous** (*you* [singular formal or plural formal and informal]), **ils** (*they*, masculine), and **elles** (*they*, feminine).
- ✓ The *direct object pronouns* replace nouns that are the direct object of the verb. For example: **je l'ai vu** (*I saw it/him*). The DOPs are: **me** (*me*), **te** (*you*), **le** (*him/it*), **la** (*her/it*), **l'** (*him/her/it* before a vowel), **nous** (*us*), **vous** (*you*), and **les** (*them*).
- ✓ The *indirect object pronouns* replace nouns that are indirect objects of the verb. For example: **tu lui parles** (*you speak to him/her*). They are: **me** (*to me*), **te** (*to you*), **lui** (*to him/her/it*), **nous** (*to us*), **vous** (*to you*), and **leur** (*to them*).
- ✓ The direct object **y** replaces a noun that indicated a place (most of the time). For example: **elle y va** (*she's going there*). **Y** is alone in its kind.
- ✓ The object pronoun **en** replaces a noun that was the object of the verb and indicated a quantity. For example: **tu en manges beaucoup** (*you eat a lot of it*). **En** is also one of a kind.
- ✓ The *stress pronouns* replace nouns that refer to people, after certain prepositions. For example: **viens avec moi** (*come with me*). They are: **moi** (*me*), **toi** (*you*), **lui** (*him/it*), **elle** (*her/it*), **nous** (*us*), **vous** (*you*), **eux** (*them*, masculine), and **elles** (*them*, feminine).
- ✓ The *reflexive pronouns* help conjugate pronominal verbs that express an action done to oneself. For example: **elle se regarde dans le miroir** (*she looks at herself in the mirror*). The reflexive pronouns are: **me** (*myself*), **te** (*yourself*), **se** (*himself/herself/itself*), **nous** (*ourselves*), **vous** (*yourselves*), and **se** (*themselves*).

Chapter 13 has more information on most of these pronouns; in addition, check out Chapter 6 for details on subject pronouns and Chapter 7 for details on reflexive pronouns.