

Chapter 1

Verbs 101: The Lowdown on Verbs

In This Chapter

- ▶ Looking at and classifying verbs
- ▶ Identifying transitive and intransitive verbs
- ▶ Considering mood
- ▶ Recognizing the tenses
- ▶ Eyeing pronouns

Whether you're speaking English, German, Spanish, or French (just to mention a few languages), a *verb* is an important word that indicates an action (for example, **Je parle** means *I am speaking, I speak, and I do speak*) or a state of being (for example, **Je suis optimiste** means *I am optimistic*). The verb is an essential component in a sentence because the sentence is incomplete without it. Verbs are the only words that change their forms in order to indicate the present, the future, and the past. A verb can also have several complements or provide further information. It can be followed by a noun, an adverb, a preposition, or a clause. It can also be followed by another verb, which is always in the infinitive form.

This chapter looks at the verb basics. I classify verbs, show how those classifications affect the way you use a verb, explain how mood impacts verbs, and look at the different verb tenses. This chapter can answer any quick questions you have about verbs before I go into the specifics in each chapter.

Identifying the Four Main Verb Types

A good way to remember various verb conjugations is by classifying the verbs. For example, if a verb is regular, check to see whether its infinitive ends in **-er**, **-ir**, or **-re**. This ending can help you follow a set pattern in conjugating the verb. Remember, if you know how to conjugate one verb in each of the three groups of regular verbs, then you know how to conjugate hundreds of verbs. The following four classifications help you identify the type of verb and enable you to conjugate it correctly.

- ✓ **Regular verbs:** These verbs shouldn't cause any undue stress. They follow the regular conjugation rules for **-er**, **-ir**, and **-re** verbs, which are the three groups of regular verbs. (Check out Chapter 2 for the lowdown on present-tense regular verbs.)
- ✓ **Spelling-change verbs:** When studying French verbs, you encounter some verbs that undergo spelling changes. This spelling change happens for many reasons. One reason is to enable you to pronounce a mute **e**, as in the verbs **appeler** (*to call*) and **jeter** (*to throw*), which double their consonants (**l** or **t**) after the mute **e**. For other verbs, you add an accent grave to the **e** so it becomes **è**, as in the verb **acheter** (*to buy*). Other verbs are affected because of the pronunciation of the consonant — specifically **g** and **c**. (Flip to Chapter 3 for more on spelling-change verbs.)

- ✓ **Irregular verbs:** With these verbs you need to keep on your toes. They have an irregular conjugation and don't follow a specific pattern like regular verbs do. (See Chapter 4 for more on these irregular verbs.)
- ✓ **Pronominal verbs:** These include *reflexive verbs*, and you use these verbs when you do something to yourself. The action reflects back to the subject of the sentence. For example, **Je me brosse les dents** means *I brush my teeth*. Other pronominal verbs include reciprocal verbs where two or more people do the action onto themselves. For example, **Ils s'écrivent** means *They write to each other*. Some idiomatic expressions also use pronominal verbs. For example, **Nous nous entendons bien** means *We get along well*. The one thing that all these verbs have in common is the addition of pronominal pronouns that correspond to the subject pronouns. (Check out Chapter 5 for more on pronominal verbs.)

Classifying Verbs

Classifying a verb as a particular verb type can help you conjugate the verb correctly every time. Look at the ending of its infinitive form. Does the infinitive end in an **-er**, **-ir**, or **-re**? Does it end in a **-cer** or a **-ger**? Is the verb a spelling-change verb? Is the infinitive preceded by a pronominal pronoun? (The answers to all these questions are answered in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 where I give you specific examples of conjugation patterns followed by a list of verbs that follow that exact pattern.) Another important way to classify verbs is to determine whether they're transitive or intransitive. In order to do so, determine whether they're followed by a preposition or by a direct object.

This section looks a bit closer at how you classify verbs, specifically noting whether a verb is transitive or intransitive as well as the different ways they are used in English and in French.

Contrasting transitive and intransitive verbs

Knowing whether a verb is transitive or intransitive enables you to use the verb correctly every time. It guides you in using a preposition after the verb or in eliminating the preposition altogether. Furthermore, the identification between a transitive and an intransitive verb also facilitates the choice between the auxiliaries **avoir** (*to have*) or **être** (*to be*) in the compound past tenses. In this section, I show you how to tell transitive and intransitive verbs apart.

Transitive verbs are followed by a direct object rather than a preposition. They take **avoir** as their auxiliary in the compound past tenses.



Je regarde la télévision. (*I am watching television.*)

Ils aiment leurs enfants. (*They love their children.*)

An *intransitive verb* isn't followed by a direct object. Often it's followed by a preposition or nothing at all.



Je monte. (*I am going upstairs.*)

Nous passons devant la bibliothèque. (*We are passing in front of the library.*)



You must be aware of verbs that may be transitive in French but intransitive in English, and vice versa. For example, in French, the verb *to answer* is intransitive because it must be followed by the preposition **à**, as in **Je réponds à la question**. However, in English, you say *I answer the question*, and therefore *to answer* is transitive in English.

As another example, in English you say *I listen to the radio*. This sentence indicates that the verb *to listen to* is an intransitive verb in English because it isn't followed by a direct object but by the preposition *to*. In French, however, **J'écoute la radio** indicates that the verb **écouter** is a transitive verb because it's followed by a direct object. Keep an eye out for the potentially tricky verbs in Table 1-1 and Table 1-2.

Table 1-1 Comparing Transitive to Intransitive

<i>Transitive in French</i>	<i>Intransitive in English</i>
attendre J'attends le bus.	to wait for <i>I am waiting for the bus.</i>
chercher Je cherche le livre.	to look for <i>I am looking for the book.</i>
écouter J'écoute le professeur.	to listen to <i>I am listening to the professor.</i>
payer Je paie les provisions.	to pay for something <i>I am paying for the groceries.</i>

Table 1-2 Comparing Intransitive to Transitive

<i>Intransitive in French</i>	<i>Transitive in English</i>
demander à Je demande de l'argent à mon père.	to ask someone <i>I ask my dad for money.</i>
obéir à Les enfants obéissent à leurs parents.	to obey someone <i>The children obey their parents.</i>
renoncer à Tu renonces à la télévision.	to give up something <i>You are giving up television.</i>
ressembler à Il ressemble à sa mère.	to resemble someone <i>He resembles his mother.</i>
assister à Nous assistons au concert.	to attend an event <i>We are attending the concert.</i>

Following up with a preposition

Most French intransitive verbs are followed by the preposition **à**, which can mean *to*, *in*, or *at*. When the preposition **à** is followed by a definite article plus a noun (**le** for the masculine singular, **la** for the feminine singular, **l'** for masculine and feminine nouns that begin with a vowel or a mute **h**, and **les** for masculine and feminine plural nouns), two contractions are made. Table 1-3 explains these two contractions.

Table 1-3 Combining Definite Articles with the Preposition à		
Preposition + Article	Combination	Example
à + le	au	Je réponds au professeur. (<i>I'm answering the professor.</i>)
à + la	à la	Je réponds à la question. (<i>I'm answering the question.</i>)
à + l'	à l'	Je réponds à l'étudiant. (<i>I'm answering the student.</i>)
à + les	aux	Je réponds aux questions. (<i>I'm answering the questions.</i>)

Notice that the only combinations that contract are **à + le**, which becomes **au** and **à + les**, which becomes **aux**. The same types of transformations occur with the preposition **de**, which means *of*, *about*, or *from*, as Table 1-4 indicates.

Table 1-4 Combining Definite Articles with the Preposition de		
Preposition + Article	Combination	Example
de + le	du	Il vient du cinéma. (<i>He's coming [back] from the movies.</i>)
de + la	de la	Il vient de la librairie. (<i>He's coming [back] from the bookstore.</i>)
de + l'	de l'	Il vient de l'épicerie. (<i>He's coming [back] from the grocery store.</i>) Il vient de l'hôtel. (<i>He's coming [back] from the hotel.</i>)
de + les	des	Il vient des champs. (<i>He's coming [back] from the fields.</i>)



Identify the transitive and intransitive verbs in the following questions. If the verb is intransitive, add the preposition **à** and make any necessary contractions with the definite article. If it's transitive, leave it alone.

Q. Tu renonces _____ chocolat. (*You are giving up chocolate.*)

A. Tu renonces **au** chocolat.

1. Nous écoutons _____ la radio. (*We listen to the radio.*)

2. Ils ressemblent _____ leur mère. (*They resemble their mother.*)

3. J'obéis _____ mes grands-parents. (*I obey my grandparents.*)

4. Vous attendez _____ le train. (*You wait/are waiting for the train.*)

5. Tu cherches _____ tes clés. (*You are looking for your keys.*)

6. Nous assistons _____ match de football. (*We attend/are attending a soccer game.*)
7. Je réponds _____ mes amis. (*I answer my friends.*)
8. Tu paies _____ tes achats. (*You pay/are paying for your purchases.*)
9. Elle demande _____ ses amis de sortir. (*She asks her friends to go out.*)
10. Nous renonçons _____ la glace. (*We give up/are giving up ice cream.*)

Linking, Auxiliary, Impersonal, and Helping Verbs, Oh My!

Verbs have many different functions. Besides being the core of a sentence, verbs dictate what you need to bring a sentence to its conclusion. They can be followed by another verb, a noun, a pronoun, an adjective, a preposition, or a clause. Some verbs link the subject to nouns, pronouns, or adjectives. Auxiliary verbs help form all compound past tenses in French. Some verbs exist only in the impersonal **il** (*it*) form, and others help emphasize and support the infinitive. Oh, the versatility of verbs!

Linking everything together

Some verbs are *linking* verbs, which means that they link the subject to the noun, to the pronoun, or to the adjective. These verbs include **être** (*to be*), **paraître** (*to appear*), **sembler** or **avoir l'air** (*to seem*), **devenir** (*to become*), and **rester** (*to stay*).



Il a l'air fatigué. (*He seems tired.*)

Elle est avocate. (*She is a lawyer.*)

Focusing on the auxiliaries

The French language has two main *auxiliary* verbs: **avoir** (*to have*) and **être** (*to be*). You use them along with past participles to form all compound past tenses in French. Check out Part III for more on the past tenses and how to use these auxiliaries.

Eyeing the impersonals

Impersonal verbs are the ones that exist only in the third person masculine singular (**il**) form. In this form, the subject pronoun is always translated as *it* in English. These verbs include expressions like **il faut** (*it is necessary*), **il s'agit de** (*it is about*), **il pleut** (*it is raining*), **il neige** (*it is snowing*), and **il fait** used for weather. Examples include **il fait beau** (*it is nice out*), **il fait froid** (*it is cold*), and **il fait chaud** (*it is hot*). Furthermore, French has many impersonal expressions, many of which use **être** (*to be*) and are followed by the subjunctive tense, like **il est important que** (*it is important that*), **il est possible que** (*it is possible that*), **il est nécessaire que** (*it is necessary that*), and so on. Look at Chapter 19 for a list of these expressions.

Lending a helping hand

Some verbs are *semi-auxiliaries*. That means that they are helping verbs to the main verb, which is in the infinitive form. These verbs include **pouvoir** (*to be able to*), **vouloir** (*to want to*), **devoir** (*to have to*), **aller** (*to go*), **faire** (*to do, to make*), and **laisser** (*to leave* — as in *leave it alone* or *let it be*).

Watching Your Mood

Verbs are divided into various moods. Linguistically, the mood of a verb is a way of expressing oneself, or a way of speaking. A mood shows the speaker's attitude toward an event. The French language has seven such moods that are divided into two categories: personal moods and impersonal moods.

Making it personal

The verbs in the personal moods are conjugated in order to correspond to the subject pronouns. These are divided into four groups:

- ✓ **The indicative mood** (which is the mood that's used most often) indicates that the speaker is talking about a fact, or something that's happening, will happen, or has happened. (See Parts I, II, and III for more on the conjugations of the various tenses of the indicative mood.)
- ✓ **The subjunctive mood** (which you use more often in French than in English) is the mood of doubt, uncertainty, emotion, will, and command. (See Chapters 19, 20, and 21 for more details on the present and past subjunctive.)
- ✓ **The imperative mood** expresses an order, a request, or a directive. The imperative mood uses the present tense of most verbs and the conjugations of the following three subject pronouns: **tu**, **nous**, and **vous**. However, you never use the subject pronouns in an imperative construction. (See Chapter 8 for the formations and use of the imperatives or commands.)
- ✓ **The conditional mood** appears in a hypothetical sentence where you place the conditional form of the verb in the result clause. For example, you may say **Si j'avais de l'argent, je voyagerais**. (*If I had money, I would travel*.) You may also use the conditional to make polite requests or suggestions. (See Chapters 17 and 18 for more on the present and past conditional tenses as well as the hypothetical sentences.)

Don't take it so personally: The impersonal mood

Unlike the personal moods, the impersonal mood verbs aren't conjugated because they don't correspond to any particular subject pronoun. These impersonal mood verbs include the infinitive, the gerund, and the participle. The infinitive mood is often used as a noun. An example is in the French saying **Vouloir, c'est pouvoir**, which translates to *Where there's a will, there's a way*. Literally, it means *To want to is to be able to*. The gerund can be used as an adverb, like it is in the sentence **On réussit à la vie en travaillant dur**, meaning *One succeeds in life by working hard*. The participle can be used as an adjective, as in the example **Les devoirs finis, ils ont joué au basket**, which means *Once the homework was finished, they played basketball*.

Categorizing the Tenses

Tense means *time*, and verbs change their forms in order to tell present, past, or future time. Verbs have two parts, the stem and the endings that specify time, mood, and person.

French has two types of verbs:



- ✓ **Simple verbs.** A simple verb is formed when a verb is conjugated by itself without an auxiliary. It's composed of a stem to which you add endings. The present, the imperfect, the passé simple, the future, the present conditional, and the present subjunctive are all simple tenses.

Elle partira bientôt. (*She will leave soon.*)



- ✓ **Compound tenses.** You construct these verbs with an auxiliary, either **avoir** (*to have*) or **être** (*to be*), plus the past participle of any verb you wish. The passé composé, the pluperfect, the passé antérieur, the future perfect, the past conditional, and the past subjunctive are all compound tenses.

Vous avez téléphoné hier. (*You called yesterday.*)

Poring Over Pronouns

Every conjugated verb corresponds to a subject that makes a sentence complete. The subject can be a person, a thing, or an idea. You can see the subject pronoun classifications in Table 1-5.

Table 1-5 Subject Pronoun Classifications		
Subject Pronoun Classification	Singular Subject Pronouns	Plural Subject Pronouns
First Person	je (<i>I</i>)	nous (<i>we</i>)
Second Person	tu (<i>you</i>)	vous (<i>you</i>)
Third Person	il/elle/on (<i>he/she/it or one</i>)	ils/elles (<i>they</i>)

When a verb begins with a vowel or a mute **h**, drop the **e** from **je** and add an apostrophe.



J'aime (*I like, I love*)

J'habite (*I live*)

Remember that you never drop the **u** in **tu** (*you*) or the **e** in **elle** (*she*) before a vowel or a mute **h**. Instead you say **Tu aimes** (*You like, You love*) and **Tu habites** (*You live*). **Tu** and **vous** both mean *you*, and as you can see from Table 1-5, **tu** is singular whereas **vous** is plural. But as you probably already know, **vous** can also refer to one person when it's formal. You use **tu** with people you know well, like family members, peers, and children. You use **vous** with someone you don't know well, with someone who is older, and with a superior, like your boss, your teacher, or your supervisor. Note that even when **vous** refers to one person, you always conjugate the verb in the plural. In other words, the conjugation of **vous** doesn't change even if it refers to one person. Grammatically, you always conjugate it in the second person plural.

On is a subject pronoun that has several meanings. In the sentence **On parle français au Canada**, the word **on** can mean *one*, *we*, or *they*, so you translate the sentence *One/We/They speak French in Canada*. Whatever the meaning, conjugate **on** in the third person singular.

Il is a masculine subject pronoun that can replace a person or a thing, and it means *he* or *it*. For example, **Pierre est heureux** means *Pierre is happy*. You can replace **Pierre** with **il**, and it means *He is happy*. The same concept applies with a thing. **Le vent souffle** means *The wind is blowing*. You can replace **le vent** with the subject pronoun **il**, which means *It is blowing*.

The same applies to **elle**, which replaces a feminine singular noun. For example, you can say **Anne est avocate** (*Anne is a lawyer*) or **Elle est avocate** (*She is a lawyer*). In the sentence **La voiture est sale** (*The car is dirty*), you can replace **voiture** with **elle** because it's feminine singular. **Elle est sale** means *It is dirty*.

Again, the same is true of the plurals **ils** and **elles**. They can refer to people or things.



Les invités sont arrivés (*The guests have arrived*), **Ils sont arrivés** (*They have arrived*)

Les livres sont chers (*The books are expensive*), **Ils sont chers** (*They are expensive*)

Les filles sont jeunes (*The girls are young*), **Elles sont jeunes** (*They are young*)

Les cathédrales sont impressionnantes (*The cathedrals are impressive*), **Elles sont impressionnantes** (*They are impressive*)



Change the following boldfaced subjects into their corresponding subject pronouns. Write your answer in the blank at the end of the sentence.

O. Céline est charmante. (*Céline is charming*)

A. Elle est charmante. (*She is charming*)

11. **Eric et Mathieu** jouent au football. (*Eric and Mathieu play soccer*) _____

12. **Anne et moi** aimons la cuisine française. (*Anne and I like French cuisine*)

13. **Sylvie** chante bien. (*Sylvie sings well*) _____

14. **Mélanie et Sarah** aiment le chocolat. (*Mélanie and Sarah like chocolate*)

15. **Benjamin** parle japonais. (*Benjamin speaks Japanese*) _____

16. **Alexandre et Sophie** invitent leurs amis. (*Alexandre and Sophie invite their friends*)

17. **Olivier** travaille dans une banque. (*Olivier works in a bank*) _____

18. **Hélène et Antoine** partent en vacances. (*Hélène and Antoine are leaving for vacation*)

19. **Claire** habite à Bordeaux. (*Claire lives in Bordeaux*) _____

20. **Suzanne et Margot** sont de bonnes amies. (*Suzanne and Margot are good friends*)

Answer Key

This section includes the answers from the practice problems in this chapter. Look at the correct answers and compare your answers.

- 1 Nous écoutons la radio. (*We listen to the radio.*)
- 2 Ils ressemblent à leur mère. (*They resemble their mother.*)
- 3 J'obéis à mes grands-parents. (*I obey my grandparents.*)
- 4 Vous attendez le train. (*You wait/are waiting for the train.*)
- 5 Tu cherches tes clés. (*You are looking for your keys.*)
- 6 Nous assistons au match de football. (*We attend/are attending a soccer game.*)
- 7 Je réponds à mes amis. (*I answer my friends.*)
- 8 Tu paies tes achats. (*You pay/are paying for your purchases.*)
- 9 Elle demande à ses amis de sortir. (*She asks her friends to go out.*)
- 10 Nous renonçons à la glace. (*We give up/are giving up ice cream.*)
- 11 Ils jouent au football. (*They play soccer.*)
- 12 Nous aimons la cuisine française. (*We like French cuisine.*)
- 13 Elle chante bien. (*She sings well.*)
- 14 Elles aiment le chocolat. (*They like chocolate.*)
- 15 Il parle japonais. (*He speaks Japanese.*)
- 16 Ils invitent leurs amis. (*They invite their friends.*)
- 17 Il travaille dans une banque. (*He works in a bank.*)
- 18 Ils partent en vacances. (*They are leaving for vacation.*)
- 19 Elle habite à Bordeaux. (*She lives in Bordeaux.*)
- 20 Elles sont de bonnes amies. (*They are good friends.*)

