

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 conjunctions**) 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.

The Basics of Composing Sentences

After you know the parts of speech in French, you can put them together to compose a sentence. The following sections explain how to start with a verb and then add embellishment.



Starting with a conjugated verb

To function properly in a sentence, a verb needs to be *conjugated*, which means:

- ✓ Matching the subject in person (first, second, or third) and number (plural or singular)
- ✓ Expressing when the action takes place through the use of a tense (now, in the past, in the future, and so on)

To do either one of those two operations, you need to know the *pattern* of conjugation for your verb. It is usually made up of a *stem* and an *ending*. Here's an example: To get the present tense pattern of a regular verb with an **-er** infinitive, drop the **-er** and replace it with the following endings that correspond to the subjects:

- ✓ For **je**, add **-e** to the stem.
- ✓ For **tu**, add **-es** to the stem.
- ✓ For **il/elle/on**, add **-e** to the stem.
- ✓ For **nous**, add **-ons** to the stem.
- ✓ For **vous**, add **-ez** to the stem.
- ✓ For **ils/elles**, add **-ent** to the stem.

Here they are for the verb **danser** (*to dance*).

| danser (<i>to dance</i>) | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| je danse | nous dansons |
| tu dances | vous dansez |
| il/elle/on danse | ils/elles dansent |



All regular **-er** verbs follow this pattern for the present tense, so if you memorize it, you've mastered about 80 percent of French present tense conjugation, because **-er** verbs count for over 80 percent of French verbs. For regular **-ir** and **-re** verbs, the endings to use for the present tense are different but their stem is formed the same way, by dropping the infinitive endings **-ir** and **-re**. (Check out Chapter 6 for the scoop on the present tense.) Other tenses, like the present perfect, the imperfect, and the future, use different stems and endings but also follow conjugation patterns. Parts IV and V talk about the conjugation patterns of other tenses in detail.

Adding details

You can develop your sentences by adding as much information as you want. Saying **les enfants chantent** (*the kids sing*) is a good start on conveying information, but it's lacking in detail, don't you think? *What* are they singing? *Where*? And *when* exactly do they sing?

- ✓ To say *what* they sing, use a *direct object* like **une chanson de Noël** (*a Christmas carol*) and place it after the verb, like this: **Les enfants chantent une chanson de Noël.** (*The kids sing a Christmas carol.*)
- ✓ To say *where* they sing, use a prepositional phrase like **à l'école** (*at school*), or an adverb like **ici** (*here*): **Les enfants chantent une chanson de Noël à l'école.** (*The kids sing a Christmas carol at school.*)
- ✓ To say *when* they sing, use a prepositional phrase like **après le goûter** (*after the afternoon snack*), or an adverb like **maintenant** (*now*), like this: **Les enfants chantent une chanson de Noël à l'école, après le goûter.** (*The kids sing a Christmas carol at school after the afternoon snack.*)

You can also beef up the nouns with adjectives, but make sure they match the nouns they describe in gender and number. For example: **Les petits enfants chantent une jolie chanson de Noël à l'école, après le bon goûter.** (*The little kids sing a pretty Christmas carol at school after the good afternoon snack.*)

Fun Stuff You Can Do with Your Sentences

You can jazz up your French sentences in a few more ways. You can make them negative, turn them around to ask questions, and compare all their elements.

Going negative



To make a negative sentence in French, you don't need to change or add anything to the verb (like I just did in English with *don't*). All you need are two little negative words: **ne** and **pas** (which together mean *not*) in basic negations, or a more specific one, like **jamais** (*never*), **rien** (*nothing*), **personne** (*no one*), or **nulle part** (*nowhere*) instead of **pas**. Here are a few examples that illustrate where these words go in the sentence.

Pierre **n'écoute pas** le prof. (*Pierre doesn't listen to the teacher.*)

Tu **ne** prends **jamais** le bus. (*You never take the bus.*)

Elle **ne** fait **rien**. (*She doesn't do anything.*)

Nous **n'irons nulle part** pour les vacances. (*We will not go anywhere for the holidays.*)

Chapter 8 has more information about negative words and expressions.

Asking questions

Like in English, you can ask a simple yes-no question like **Aimez-vous les huîtres?** (*Do you like oysters?*). If you need more information, use question words like **quand** (*when*), **qui** (*who*), **où** (*where*), **pourquoi** (*why*), **comment** (*how*), or **qu'est-ce que** (*what*).

Both types of questions can be phrased in two ways:

- ✓ Inverting the normal word order of subject-verb to verb-subject (called *inversion*), as in **Aimez-vous les huîtres?** (*Do you like oysters?*) which doesn't exist in English, as opposed to **Vous aimez les huîtres** (*You like oysters*).
- ✓ Keeping the normal word order and using the tag **est-ce que** at the beginning of the question or right after the question word, if there is one. For example: **Est-ce que vous parlez français?** (*Do you speak French?*) or **Où est-ce que vous parlez français?** (*Where do you speak French?*)

Check out Chapter 9 for more on handling questions.

Making comparisons

French makes the same kinds of comparisons that English does.

- ✓ Comparative of superiority: For example, **Il est plus grand que moi.** (*He is taller [more tall] than me.*)
- ✓ Comparative of inferiority: For example, **Il est moins intéressant que toi.** (*He is less interesting than you.*)
- ✓ Comparative of equality: For example, **Il est aussi grand que moi.** (*He is as tall as me.*)

Flip to Chapter 12 for more about making comparisons.

Many Tenses and Moods

When you need to move beyond the present, you need new tenses! French has about 18 tenses/moods to choose from. In this book I focus only on the ones you will use the most: present, imperfect, future, conditional, subjunctive, and imperative for the simple tenses; and the present perfect, pluperfect, future perfect, and past conditional for the compound tenses.

The past

To express a past action, French has two main tenses to choose from. The **passé composé** (*present perfect*) names past actions that occurred, and the **imparfait** (*imperfect*) describes what it was like when the past action occurred. The **imparfait** also describes how things used to be, in your childhood for example, without focusing on a specific date. Here they are in action:

- ✓ **Passé composé:** Naming a past action: **Hier nous sommes allés au cinéma.** (*Yesterday we went to the movies.*)
- ✓ **Imparfait:** What it was like when something happened: **Quand je suis sorti ce matin, il faisait beau.** (*When I went out this morning, the weather was nice.*)
- ✓ **Imparfait:** How things used to be: **Quand nous étions petits, nous jouions au parc.** (*When we were little, we used to play in the park.*)

Head to Chapter 15 for more about the present perfect and Chapter 16 for more about the imperfect.

The future

The future tense (**le futur**) describes what will probably happen down the road, like **Je finirai ça plus tard.** (*I will finish this later.*)



To describe a future event that is certain to happen, and is almost imminent, French uses the **futur proche** (*immediate future*). For example: **Il est 6h30, elle va préparer le dîner.** (*It's 6:30; she's going to prepare dinner.*)

The future is probably the easiest tense to conjugate because its stem is the infinitive. The future endings are: **-ai, -as, -a, -ons, -ez, -ont**. Here's the complete conjugation of a regular **-er** verb in the future.

| manger (to eat) | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| je mangerai | nous mangerons |
| tu mangeras | vous mangerez |
| il/elle/on mangera | ils/elles mangeront |

Chapter 17 has what you need to know about the future tense.

The conditional

The conditional is a simple tense, and its stem is derived from the infinitive, like the future tense (see the preceding section), so it's a fairly easy one to conjugate, too. The conditional endings are: **-ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, and -aient**.

French uses **le conditionnel** (*the conditional*) to express:

- ✓ Daydreams/hypothetical situations, in combination with the imperfect (see the earlier section “The past” for details). For example: **S’il pleuvait, je resterais à la maison.** (*If it were raining, I would stay home.*)
- ✓ Friendly advice, using the verb **devoir** (*must*). For example: **Tu devrais manger moins de sucre.** (*You should eat less sugar.*)
- ✓ Polite requests, using the verb **pouvoir** (*can*). For example: **Pourriez-vous m’indiquer la poste s’il vous plaît?** (*Could you please show me the post office?*)
- ✓ Wishes, using the verb **vouloir** (*want*) or **aimer** (*like*). For example: **Nous aimerions gagner le loto.** (*We would like to win the lottery.*)
- ✓ The future in a past context. For example: **Sherlock pensait qu’il découvrirait l’assassin.** (*Sherlock thought he would discover the murderer.*)

Check out more of the conditional in Chapter 18.

The subjunctive

Le subjonctif (*the subjunctive*) is commonly used in French to say that you want someone to do something, that you’re happy or sad that something is happening, or that you fear something may happen. The subjunctive may seem difficult to native English speakers because it pretty much doesn’t exist in English. Here are some examples of the **subjonctif**:

Pierre veut que vous partiez. (*Pierre wants you to leave.*)

Il faut que tu prennes une décision. (*It’s necessary that you make a decision.*)

Les enfants sont contents que l’école finisse. (*The children are happy that school is over.*)



A sentence with a verb in subjunctive begins with a trigger phrase and has two different subjects.

- ✓ In the three preceding examples, **veut que**, **Il faut que**, and **sont contents que** are examples of triggers for the subjunctive. There are quite a few different triggers, and I give you a long list of the most useful ones in Chapter 19.
- ✓ The three preceding examples are sentences with two *clauses* (parts) and two different subjects: **Pierre** and **vous** in the first example; **il** and **tu** in the second, and **les enfants** and **l’école** in the third.

Chapter 19 has the full scoop on the subjunctive.

The imperative

Use the imperative to tell one or several persons what to do or what not to do. It is not a regular tense, because the subject is not expressed, and it has only three forms that are borrowed almost exactly from the present tense conjugation for most verbs. (For details and exceptions flip to Chapter 20.)

For example, here are the three imperative forms for **-er** verbs:

- ✔ From the present tense **tu** form (*you* [singular]) of **parler**: **Parle!** (*Speak!*)
- ✔ From the present tense **nous** (*we*) form: **Parlons!** (*Let's speak!*)
- ✔ From the present tense **vous** form (that is, the plural *you*): **Parlez!** (*Speak!*)



The negative commands are formed the same way. You just add **ne** before the imperative and **pas** after it, like this:

- ✔ From the affirmative command **parle** (*speak*) to **ne parle pas** (*don't speak*).
- ✔ From the affirmative command **parlons** (*let's speak*) to **ne parlons pas!** (*let's not speak*).
- ✔ From the affirmative command **parlez** (*speak*) to **ne parlez pas** (*don't speak*).

Compound tenses

French compound tenses are two-word verb forms that always express an action that is more past than the main action. For instance, in *He had already gotten up when his alarm finally went off*, the pluperfect verb phrase is *had gotten up*. French has several compound tenses, and the most commonly used are: the *present perfect*, which I discuss earlier in this chapter, the pluperfect, the future perfect, and the past conditional.

A French compound tense is formed by putting together a conjugated form of one of the two *auxiliary verbs* (also called helper verbs) — **être** (*to be*) and **avoir** (*to have*) — and the past participle of the main verb. (Chapter 15 has full details on how to form past participles.)

English and French compound tenses are different in their form (English may use three-word forms) and in their usage. They occur more strictly and frequently in French. Here are some examples of compound tenses in French, with nonliteral English translations:

- ✔ The pluperfect: **Il était déjà allé à la boulangerie.** (*He had already gone to the bread shop.*)
- ✔ The future perfect: **Je m'amuserai quand j'aurai fini mon travail.** (*I will play when I am finished with my work.*)
- ✔ The past conditional: **Si elle avait su, elle aurait choisi l'autre solution.** (*If she had known, she would have chosen the other solution.*)

See Chapter 21 for full details on compound tenses.