

Chapter 1

Jumping into Action with French Verbs

In This Chapter

- ▶ Eyeing grammar terms and moods
- ▶ Knowing the subject pronouns
- ▶ Classifying verb types
- ▶ Creating the present participle and gerund

Whether you're just beginning to study French or are already quite proficient in the language, you may need a little extra help identifying and forming verb tenses, especially the ones that don't actually exist in English. This chapter introduces verb terms and concepts, types of verbs, subject pronouns, and much more.

Identifying Grammar Terms

In order to fully understand the concept of verbs, you need to be able to identify verb forms and discover some tricks to help you conjugate verbs in various tenses quite easily.



The following list defines some grammar terms associated with verbs. These terms are pretty standard for Romance and Germanic languages. In fact, English uses the same terms when referring to verbs.

- ✔ **Verb:** A word that expresses an action such as *to eat* or *to speak* or a state of being, like *to think* or *to be*.
- ✔ **Transitive verb:** These verbs take a direct object. A *direct object* is a noun that follows the verb directly without the use of a preposition. It answers the questions “who” or “what” in relation to the verb. For example, when you say, *We watch the news*, the verb *to watch* is a transitive verb because it's followed by the direct object *the news*, which answers the

question *what are we watching?* In French, you'd say **nous regardons les informations**. However, some verbs are transitive in French but intransitive in English, meaning that in English, those verbs require a preposition. These verbs include **attendre** (*to wait for*), **chercher** (*to look for*), **écouter** (*to listen to*), and **payer** (*to pay for*).

- ✔ **Intransitive verb:** An *intransitive verb* is one that doesn't take a direct object and is often followed by a preposition or by nothing at all. For example, when you say **Il monte au grenier** (*He goes/is going up to the attic*), *to go up* is an intransitive verb in this sentence because the preposition **au** (*to*) follows it. Be aware that some verbs are intransitive in French, but transitive in English, such as **répondre** (*to answer*), **obéir** (*to obey*), **ressembler** (*to resemble*), and **assister** (*to attend*). The preposition **à** follows these verbs in French as in this example, **Elle ressemble à sa mère** (*She resembles her mother*).
- ✔ **Subject:** A person or a thing that performs the action in a sentence.
- ✔ **Infinitive:** The nonconjugated form of the verb. The infinitive doesn't have a subject doing the action or a tense like the present, past, or future. In English, an infinitive has the word *to* in front of it, as in *to travel* or *to work*. In French, the infinitives end in **-er**, **-ir**, or **-re**.
- ✔ **Conjugation:** A verb form that corresponds to the subject and indicates who or what is doing the action and when.
- ✔ **Verb stem:** The part of the verb that is left after you drop certain endings. For example, to form the present tense, you drop the infinitive endings **-er**, **-ir**, or **-re**. The verb stem varies, depending on the tense that you're forming. For example, to form the future and the conditional tenses, you need to take the entire infinitive of most verbs (for **-re** verbs, drop the "e") and add the appropriate endings for each tense. Chapter 2 explains the formation of all the tenses in detail.
- ✔ **Verb ending:** Endings that you add to the verb stem, which are specific to each type of verb, in order to correspond to the verb to each subject pronoun. Also, endings indicate which tense the verb is in, for example, the future, the conditional, the imperfect, and so on.
- ✔ **Tense:** The *time* of the verb to indicate whether the action is in the present, past, or future.
- ✔ **Simple tense:** The conjugation of the verb by itself without the use of an auxiliary verb. You form the simple tenses by taking the stem of the verb and adding the appropriate endings. Some verbs require modifying the stem, which I address later in this chapter. The present indicative, the imperfect, the

passé simple or simple past, the future, the conditional, the present subjunctive, and the imperfect subjunctive are all simple tenses. Check out Chapter 2.

- ✔ **Compound tense:** A verb that uses an auxiliary — **avoir** or **être** plus the past participle of the verb. The passé composé, the pluperfect, the past anterior, the future perfect, the conditional perfect, and the past and pluperfect subjunctive are all compound tenses in French. Refer to Chapter 2 for more information.
- ✔ **Auxiliary:** A helping verb that is used to form the compound tenses. In English *to have* is a helping verb as in *I have traveled* or *He has worked hard*. French has two auxiliary verbs: **avoir** (*to have*) and **être** (*to be*). Most French verbs take **avoir** as their auxiliary and a few verbs take **être**, including all pronominal verbs.
- ✔ **Mood or mode:** A way of expressing yourself or a way of speaking. A *mood* shows the speaker's attitude or feelings toward an event and most contain several tenses. French, like English, has these four moods:

- **Indicative mood:** You use this mood most often because it expresses objective reality. With the indicative mood, the speaker is talking about a fact or about something that is happening, will happen, or has happened.
- **Subjunctive mood:** Used more often in French than in English, this is the mood of subjectivity, emotion, doubt, and will.
- **Conditional mood:** This mood uses the word *would* and often appears in the result clause of hypothetical sentences, such as “If this were to happen, then this would happen.” You also use the conditional mood to make polite requests or suggestions.
- **Imperative mood:** Imperative is the technical term for the command, which expresses an order or a request. Just like in English, you don't use the subject pronoun with commands. For example, in English you'd say *Eat!* or *Let's eat!*

French has three command forms, which are derived from the **tu**, **nous**, and **vous** forms of the present tense for the majority of verbs. Here I show the three forms of the verb **manger** (*to eat*) as an example. Conjugate the verb in the three forms and then drop the subject pronoun to get the imperative form: **Mange! Mangeons! Mangez!** The **tu** form doesn't have an **s** on the verb because you drop it for all **-er** verbs in the imperative. A few verbs have irregular imperative forms.

Meeting the Subject Pronouns

No sentence is complete without a subject and a verb. The *subject* indicates who or what is performing the action and the verb is conjugated to correspond to it. Each verb has six conjugations per tense, corresponding to the six person forms, three singular and three plural. Table 1-1 shows the French subject pronouns with their English translations.

Table 1-1 Subject Pronouns in Conjugating Verbs

Person	Singular	Plural
1st	je/j' (<i>I</i>)	nous (<i>we</i>)
2nd	tu (<i>you</i> singular informal)	vous (<i>you</i> singular formal and plural)
3rd	il/elle/on (<i>he, she, it, one</i>)	ils/elles (<i>they</i>)

In French, the subject pronoun must always accompany the verb, unless it's in the imperative or command form.



Here are some clarifications regarding subject pronouns.

- ✔ **Je:** Unlike *I* in English, **je** isn't capitalized in French, unless it begins the sentence. Additionally, you drop the **e** in **je** and add an apostrophe (**j'**) if the verb that follows it begins with a vowel or a mute h. (For more on the Hs in French, refer to chapter 3.) For example, **J'habite à Boston.** (*I live in Boston.*)
- ✔ **Il and elle:** Just like French nouns, French pronouns have a gender, which means that they can be feminine or masculine. For example, **il** (*he*) or **elle** (*she*) refer not only to a person, but also to a masculine or feminine singular object or thing, meaning *it*.
- ✔ **Tu and vous:** Both **tu** and **vous** mean *you*, but they have a major difference.

Tu is always singular. Use the informal singular **tu** with family members, peers, children, or animals.

Vous can be singular or plural. Use the formal **vous** when you're meeting someone for the first time, with someone who is older than you, and with your supervisor or boss. Use **vous** when you're referring to two or more people, whether informally or formally. Remember that no matter how you use **vous** (to refer to one person or to several people), the verb is always in the second person plural form. **Note:** When it doubt, use **vous**.

- ✓ **On:** The third person singular pronoun **on** can mean *one*, *we*, *they*, and *people* in English. For example, **On s’amuse en vacances** can mean *One has fun on vacation* or *we/they/people have fun on vacation*. Whether **on** refers to a singular or to a plural subject, its verb conjugation is always third person singular.

Categorizing the Main Verb Types

When you conjugate a verb, it’s helpful to know what verb type it is so you can follow a set pattern and correctly conjugate it.



French has four main verb types. When you follow the set pattern for each of these types, you can conjugate thousands of verbs. The four main verb types are as follows:

- ✓ **Regular verbs:** You’ll notice three categories of regular verbs in French, whose infinitives end as follows:
- The **–er** verbs: This is the largest group of verbs. Check out the verb table for **parler** (*to talk*) for an example.
 - The **–ir** verbs: The second category is also common. Refer to the verb table for **finir** (*to finish*) as an example.
 - The **–re** verbs: This is also a common group of verbs and its conjugation is quite simple. Check out the verb table for **attendre** (*to wait for*) for an example.
- ✓ **Stem-change verbs:** Most of these verbs undergo a stem-change in the first, second, and third person singular and in the third person plural in the present indicative and present subjunctive. This change allows you to pronounce a mute **e**, as in the verbs **appeler** (*to call*) and **jeter** (*to throw*), by doubling their respective consonants **l** and **t** after the mute **e**. Other verbs, such as **acheter** (*to buy*) require the **accent grave** on the **e** — like *so*, *è*, instead of a double consonant.
- Verbs with infinitives ending in **–cer** and **–ger**, such as the verbs **commencer** (*to begin*) and **manger** (*to eat*), also undergo a stem change, but only in the **nous** (*we*) form in the present indicative. For **–cer** verbs, in order to pronounce the **c** as an **s**, you need to add the **accent cédille** (*cedilla*) underneath the **c** — like *so*, *ç*, when the **c** is followed by an **a** or an **o**. For **–ger** verbs, you need to keep the **e** after the **g** before the **–ons**, in order for the **g** to be pronounced like the **s** in the English word *leisure* and not like the **g** in the word *guess*. You also add an **e** after the **g** when it’s followed by an **a**. Refer to both of these verbs in Part II for clear examples of each tense.

- ✓ **Irregular verbs:** These verbs don't follow a regular pattern and have a conjugation that is specific to them. They include some very common verbs like **avoir** (*to have*), **être** (*to be*), **aller** (*to go*), **faire** (*to do, to make*), and **venir** (*to come*) to name a few.
- ✓ **Pronominal verbs:** These types of verbs also have pronominal pronouns that are placed after the subject pronouns. French has three types:
 - **Reflexive verbs:** The subject does the action on itself. For example, **Je me lave** means *I wash myself* as opposed to **Je lave la voiture** (*I wash the car*).
 - **Reciprocal verbs:** Two or more people are doing the action to each other. For example, **Ils se parlent** means *They speak to each other*.
 - **Idiomatic expressions:** You can't understand the meaning of these pronominal verbs from their nonpronominal form. For example, the verb **entendre** means *to hear*. However, in its pronominal form, **s'entendre** means *to get along*, as in **Ils s'entendent bien** (*They get along well*).

These verbs follow a regular conjugation pattern, but they include the pronominal pronouns, which are placed between the subject pronouns and the verb. Also, these verbs include the pronoun **se** (or **s'** if the verb begins with a vowel or a mute **h**) in the infinitive form. Look up the verb table for **se réveiller** (*to wake up*) to see an example.

Forming the Present Participle and the Gerund

In English, the present participle ends in *-ing*, and in French, it ends in **-ant** and often answers the question “why” or “how.” To form the present participle of the majority of verbs in French, simply take the **nous** form of the present indicative verb conjugation, drop the **-ons**, and add **-ant**. For example, *doing* is **faisant** and *speaking* is **parlant**.

You can also use the present participle as a verb-noun. In this case, add the preposition **en** in front of the present participle to form the gerund in French. Adding **en** to the present participle means *in, by, while, upon* as in **en parlant**, which can mean *in, by, while, upon speaking*.

To know how to create the past participle, head to Chapter 2.