

- » Starting off on the right foot with a greeting
- » Introducing yourself and others
- » Being polite
- » Using the right subject pronouns

Chapter 1

Getting to Know You

Bonjour ! (*Hello!*) and welcome to the most important chapter in this book and in your entire French language journey. Knowing how to greet people in French is more than just understanding that **bonjour** means *hello*; in fact, this simple word is vital to making sure that all of your interactions start off on the right foot.

In addition to sharing the different French greetings, I explain how to introduce yourself and others, offer tips on being polite, and describe the differences between subject pronouns.

French Greetings

As a kid, you might have been told that *please* is the magic word, but in French, it's definitely **bonjour** (*hello*) or an equivalent greeting (depending on the time of day and your relationship to the person you're talking to). In this section I cover the three primary French greetings that you need to be familiar with.

Hello



DIFFERENCES

In English, it's perfectly normal not to say "hello" in some situations. For example, when approaching a stranger for directions, English speakers are likely to say "excuse me" rather than "hello." In France, however, not using a greeting like **Bonjour** (*Hello*) to start a conversation is considered very rude. Any conversation — even a short one — simply can't begin without **bonjour** or another greeting. In a situation where you need to start with **Excusez-moi** (*Excuse me*), it's important to then add a greeting before anything else or you run the risk of being ignored or given a frosty look followed by a pointed, "Bonjour" in return.

Appropriate French greetings include

- » **bonjour** (*hello*): The greeting commonly used in the morning and afternoon, with anyone and everyone. The French language spoken in France doesn't have specific terms for *good morning* or *good afternoon* — **bonjour** is used for all of these. In comparison, Canadian French does have a different term for *good morning*: **bon matin**.
- » **bonsoir** (*good evening*): As opposed to **bonjour**, which means *hello, good morning*, and *good afternoon*, **bonsoir** means *good evening*. I can't give you a definite time when you should switch from **bonjour** to **bonsoir**, but a good rule of thumb is either 6 p.m. or when the sun starts to set, whichever is earlier. You can also take cues from the people around you. If you're in a room full of people all saying **bonsoir** to each other at 3 p.m., you can either be a rebel with **bonjour** or just go with the flow and say **bonsoir**.
- » **salut** (*hi*): Informal — you can and should use **salut** only with friends, family, and kids, at any time of day.



PRACTICE

Mind your manners! Decide which greeting is most appropriate with each person at the time given.

Q. Your cousin at 11 a.m.: _____

A. Salut (*Hi*)

- 1 The mail carrier at 8 a.m.: _____
- 2 A friend at 3 p.m.: _____
- 3 Your boss at 9 a.m.: _____
- 4 Your brand-new neighbor at 7 p.m.: _____
- 5 A waitress at 12:30 p.m.: _____
- 6 Your preschooler son's friend at 8 p.m.: _____
- 7 Your daughter at 1 p.m.: _____
- 8 A cashier at 6 p.m.: _____
- 9 Your spouse at 10 p.m.: _____
- 10 The plumber at 10 a.m.: _____

How are you?

Many English speakers say, "How are you?" to anyone and everyone, even when they don't expect an answer or assume it will be an automatic, "Fine." For the French, it's just the opposite: They ask the question only when they expect and care about the response. If you casually

ask a French cashier or bank teller how they are, for example, you're likely to get a puzzled look in return.

Comment allez-vous ? means *How are you?* and is formal and/or plural, meaning you should use it when talking to either

- » A person with whom you use respectful language
- » More than one person

When talking to just one person with whom you use **tu** (see the section “Tu or vous: The second person,” later in this chapter), you can use any of these more informal versions to ask *How are you?*

- » **Comment vas-tu ?**
- » **Comment tu vas ?**
- » **Comment ça va ?**
- » **Ça va ?**

All of these questions mean basically the same thing — *How are you?* — but grammatically, they're a bit different.

To answer any of the questions that begin with **Comment**, you can give a real response, such as **Super, bien sûr, je suis à Paris !** (*Great, of course, I'm in Paris!*), or you can say something non-committal, such as **Bien** (*Fine*) or **Très bien** (*Very good*). In addition, you can answer with **Ça va** (*Fine*).

In contrast, **Ça va ?** literally means *Is it going (well)?* So, in addition to any of the responses just mentioned, you can answer with a simple **Oui** (*Yes*) or **Non** (*No*).

You can also use **Ça va ?** when addressing more than one person with whom you use **tu**, such as your children or a group of friends.



TIP

You absolutely could have a conversation in French that consists of just two words repeated as questions and answers:

- **Ça va ?** (*How's it going?*)
- **Ça va, ça va. Ça va ?** (*Fine, fine. How's it going?*)
- **Ça va.** (*Fine.*)

However, you're more likely to have a few extra words thrown in:

- **Ça va ?** (*How's it going?*)
- **Ça va, merci. Et toi, ça va ?** (*Fine, thanks. And you, is it going well?*)
- **Oui, ça va bien.** (*Yes, fine.*)



Do you want to know how I am? Decide whether you should use **Ça va ?** with each of these people and circle your answer.

PRACTICE

Q. A banker Yes No

A. No

11 Your daughter Yes No

12 Your new neighbors Yes No

13 A waitress Yes No

14 Your brother Yes No

15 A group of friends Yes No

16 A cashier Yes No

Won't you tell me your name?

When meeting someone for the first time, in addition to saying **Bonjour** (*Hello*), the two parties need to exchange names, or at least have someone else do it for them.

You can ask someone's name by saying either **Comment vous appelez-vous ?** or **Comment t'appelles-tu ?** (*What is your name?*). Your choice here depends on whether you're talking

» Formally or to more than one person. (**Comment vous appelez-vous ?**)

» To one person with whom you'll use **tu**. (**Comment t'appelles-tu ?**)



TIP

You may be tempted to think that you should always say **Comment vous appelez-vous ?** — after all, by definition, you're talking to someone you don't know, so **vous** would seem to make sense. But that's not the only criterion for using **vous**. See the section "Tu or vous: The second person," later in this chapter, for the full explanation.

You can answer the question *What is your name?* with any of the next four phrases. With the first two responses, you can provide your first name or your full name:

» **Je m'appelle . . .** (*My name is . . .*)

» **Je suis . . .** (*I am . . .*)

These next two phrases are more limited:

» **Mon nom est . . .** (*My name is . . .*): Can only be used when you give your full name

» **Mon prénom est . . .** (*My first name is . . .*): Can precede only your first name

You can introduce someone else with the following phrases (which both mean *I'd like to introduce you to . . .*):

» Je vous présente . . .

» Je te présente . . .

You can also say

» Il s'appelle . . . (*His name is . . .*)

» Elle s'appelle . . . (*Her name is . . .*)

» In an informal situation, simply **Voici** . . . (*This is . . .*).

If necessary, you can include a title in front of the name:

» Monsieur/M. (*Mr.*)

» Madame/Mme (*Mrs.*)

» Mademoiselle/Mlle (*Miss*)



PRACTICE

What's in a name? You're at a conference with your partner, Shay. You meet a woman whom you don't know and run into your friend Marc. Fill in the blanks with the correct introduction. (*Note: You can use each phrase only once if at all. I marked out Je m'appelle because it's the answer to the example question.*)

- Elle s'appelle
- Il s'appelle
- Je m'appelle
- Je te présente
- Je vous présente
- Mon nom est
- Mon prénom est

Q. You: Bonsoir Madame. Comment vous appelez-vous ?

A. Woman: Je m'appelle Agathe Anam.

17 You: Bonsoir Mme Anam. _____ Laura.

18 _____ mon ami Shay, et

19 Shay, _____ Mme Anam.

20 Shay: Bonsoir Mme Anam. _____ Shay Lavee.

21 You: Ah, salut Marc ! Est-ce que tu connais cette dame ? _____
Mme Anam.

Using Other Social Niceties Appropriately

Although **bonjour** (*hello*) is the most important social nicety, it isn't the only one. You also need *please, thank you, you're welcome, and good-bye*.

Saying please, thank you, and you're welcome

You have two ways to say "please," based on — you guessed it! — whether you use **vous** or **tu** with the person:

» **s'il vous plaît**

» **s'il te plaît**

Merci means *thank you*, and you can make it stronger by adding **beaucoup** (*very much*).

You're welcome is **je vous en prie** or **je t'en prie**. You'll also hear **de rien** (*it was nothing*), but this response can seem ungracious.

Parting ways

There are quite a few different expressions you can use when leaving, such as

» **au revoir** (*good-bye*)

» **bonne journée** (*have a nice day*)

» **bon/bonne après-midi** (*have a nice afternoon*)

Note: The word **après-midi** can be either masculine or feminine with no difference in meaning

» **bonne soirée** (*have a nice evening*)

» **bonne nuit** (*good night*)

» **à bientôt** (*see you soon*)

» **à plus** (*see you later*)

» **à la prochaine** (*until next time*)

Note that the last two farewells are slightly informal.



Time to play matchmaker! Connect a social nicety on the left with the one on the right that you'd expect to hear in the same exchange. Each term can be matched only once. I get you started.

bonjour

je vous en prie

bonjour

au revoir

bonsoir

bonne journée

salut

bonne soirée

s'il te plaît

à la prochaine

s'il vous plaît

je t'en prie

Understanding Subject Pronouns

The subject is the person, place, or thing that's doing something in a sentence. In "My dog has fleas," for example, *my dog* is the subject. A subject pronoun can replace a subject, so if you've already mentioned your dog, you can just say "he" or "she" when you refer to your dog again.

Subject pronouns exist in both French and English, but they're extra important in French because each one has its own conjugation, or verb form. In a verb conjugation table, each subject pronoun represents any noun that has the same number and grammatical person — the role the subject plays in the conversation. Subject pronouns may be singular or plural, and they may be first person (the speaker), second person (the listener/reader/recipient), or third person (everyone else). Table 1-1 breaks down the pronouns so that you can better understand them.

Table 1-1 French Subject Pronouns and Their English Cohorts

Person	Singular	Plural
1st	je (<i>I</i>)	nous (<i>we</i>)
2nd	tu (<i>you</i>)	vous (<i>you</i>)
3rd (masculine)	il (<i>he, it</i>)	ils (<i>they</i>)
3rd (feminine)	elle (<i>she, it</i>)	elles (<i>they</i>)
3rd (indefinite)	on (<i>one, people, they, we</i>)	n/a

Note: In formal situations, **vous** can be singular — see the section "Tu or vous: The second person," later in this chapter, for details.

I explain the particularities and contradictions of the indefinite pronoun **on** in the section “Il, elle, or on: The third-person singular,” later in this chapter.



DIFFERENCES

French has a different conjugation for each grammatical person, whereas English usually has only two conjugations: one for third-person singular (*he walks*) and one for everything else (*I walk, you walk, we walk, they walk*). The following sections take a closer look at these pronouns to help you use them correctly.

Je or nous: The first person

Je is the first-person singular pronoun. Unlike its English equivalent *I*, **je** is capitalized only when it begins a sentence.

Je suis écrivain. (*I'm a writer.*)

Demain, je vais en France. (*Tomorrow, I'm going to France.*)

Note that when **je** is followed by a word that begins with a vowel or mute **h** (see Chapter 3 for more about the mute **h**), it contracts to **j'**.

J'ai grandi en Floride. (*I grew up in Florida.*)

Maintenant, j'habite en Californie. (*Now I live in California.*)

Nous is the first-person plural, and it means *we*. You use it the same way in French and English.

Nous allons en France. (*We're going to France.*)

Je pense que nous mangeons à midi. (*I think we're eating at noon.*)



PRACTICE

Here's a quick catch-up. You and your partner Dominique work different hours, so you often text to keep your schedules synced. Choose the correct first-person pronoun to match the translation.

Q. You: Salut Dominique, _____ suis à la banque. (Hi Dominique, I'm at the bank.)

A. je

22 You: _____ vais rentrer dans une heure. (I'll be home in an hour.)

23 Dominique: Okay, _____ ai une chose à faire et puis (Okay, I have one thing to do, and then)

24 _____ avons des billets d'opéra. (We have opera tickets.)

25 You: Mais pourquoi ? _____ détestons l'opéra ! (But why ? We hate the opera !)

26 Dominique: Pas du tout — moi, _____ adore l'opéra. (Not at all — me, I love the opera.)

Tu or vous: The second person

Tu and **vous** both mean *you*, but French distinguishes between different kinds of *you*.

Tu is singular and informal, meaning that you use it only when you're talking to

- » One person whom you know well — such as a family member, friend, classmate, or colleague
- » A child or animal

For example, here I'm greeting a friend and then talking to a child:

Salut Aurélie, comment vas-tu ? (*Hi Aurélie, how are you?*)

Tu peux commencer maintenant. (*You can begin now.*)

Vous is plural and/or formal. You use it when you're talking to

- » One person whom you don't know or to whom you wish to show respect, such as a teacher, doctor, boss, or elderly person
- » More than one person, whether or not you know them

In the following examples I use **vous** in the first instance to show respect to my professor, while in the second example I need **vous** because I'm talking to more than one child:

Bonjour Professeur Degueldre, comment allez-vous ? (*Hello Professor Degueldre, how are you?*)

Allez les enfants, vous devez faire vos devoirs ! (*Come on kids, you have to do your homework!*)



TIP

If you're not sure whether to use **tu** or **vous**, err on the side of respect and opt for **vous**. Except when you're introduced to someone by a close friend, you normally start out using **vous** with any adults you meet. At some point, if you become friends, this new person may ask you to use **tu** by saying something like, "**On peut se tutoyer.**" ("We can use **tu** with one another.") English has no real equivalent to this — "Call me John" is the closest, but it doesn't indicate the same shift to intimacy as switching from **vous** to **tu** does. Using **tu** without this sort of invitation can be very offensive, but the French usually make allowances for non-native speakers.



PRACTICE

What do you know? Decide whether to use **tu** or **vous** with each of these people or groups of people and circle your answer.

Q. Your boss **tu** **vous**

A. **vous**

27 Your spouse **tu** **vous**

28 A cashier **tu** **vous**

29	Your two kids	tu	vous
30	Your doctor	tu	vous
31	A group of friends	tu	vous
32	The waiter	tu	vous
33	Your dentist	tu	vous
34	A kid at the park	tu	vous
35	Parents of kids at the park	tu	vous
36	The bartender	tu	vous

Il, elle, or on: The third-person singular

Il and **elle** mean *he* and *she*, respectively.

Il a deux sœurs. (*He has two sisters.*)

Elle veut travailler ici. (*She wants to work here.*)

In addition, when you want to say “it,” you have to figure out the gender of the noun because you use **il** to refer to a masculine noun and **elle** to refer to a feminine noun (see Chapter 3 for details on noun gender).

Où est mon livre ? Il est sur la table. (*Where is my book? It's on the table.*)

Je vois la voiture. Elle est dans la rue. (*I see the car. It's in the street.*)

On is an indefinite pronoun that literally means *one*. But **on** can also mean *you*, *people* in general, or *we*, informally.

On ne doit pas dire cela. (*One shouldn't say that.*)

On ne sait jamais. (*You just never know.*)

On ne fait plus attention de nos jours. (*People don't pay attention any more nowadays.*)

On va partir à midi. (*We're going to leave at noon.*)



PRACTICE

Judgment time. Your friends like to gossip and are always asking, **Qu'est-ce que tu penses de . . . ?** (“What do you think about . . . ?”) Answer with the appropriate third-person singular pronoun.

Q. Qu'est-ce que tu penses de Laura ?

A. Elle est géniale ! (*She's awesome!*).

- 37 Qu'est-ce que tu penses de Marc ? _____ est drôle.
- 38 Qu'est-ce que tu penses de Sandrine ? _____ est triste.
- 39 Qu'est-ce que tu penses d'Annette ? _____ est artistique.
- 40 Qu'est-ce que tu penses de Thomas ? _____ est acerbe.
- 41 Qu'est-ce que tu penses de David ? _____ est énigmatique.
- 42 Qu'est-ce que tu penses de Christelle ? _____ est honnête.

Ils or elles: The third-person plural

Ils and **elles** mean *they*.

Ils is used for

- » Groups of men or masculine nouns
- » Mixed groups of men and women
- » Masculine and feminine nouns together

Check out these examples of **ils** in action:

Paul et David (ils) habitent à Bruxelles. (*Paul and David [they] live in Brussels.*)

Où sont mes livres ? Ils sont dans ta chambre. (*Where are my books? They're in your room.*)

Lise, Marie-Laure, Robert et Anne (ils) partent ensemble. (*Lise, Marie-Laure, Robert, and Anne [they] are leaving together.*)

Elles is used only for

- » Groups of women
- » Feminine nouns



REMEMBER

Even if there's only one man in a group of a thousand women, you have to use **ils**:

Ma mère et ma sœur (elles) aiment danser. (*My mother and sister [they] like to dance.*)

Je vois tes clés. Elles sont sur mon bureau. (*I see your keys. They're on my desk.*)



PRACTICE

You work at an advertising firm, and you're writing to a colleague about an ad idea for a product called **la Sandwichière** (*the Sandwich Maker*). Choose the best pronoun-verb pair to fill in each blank.

Q. Marc, _____ (je suis, il est) prêt à commencer. (Marc, I'm ready to start.)

A. je suis

43 Michel, _____ (j'ai, il a) une idée pour une nouvelle publicité. (Michel, I have an idea for a new ad.)

44 _____ (Peux-tu, Pouvez-vous) m'aider ? (Can you help me?)

45 _____ (Nous pouvons, Vous pouvez) travailler ensemble. (We can work together.)

Voici mon idée. Il y a un père, une mère et un enfant dans la cuisine. (Here's my idea. A father, mother, and child are in the kitchen.)

46 Le père dit à sa femme, _____ (veux-tu, voulez-vous) quelque chose à manger ? (The father says to his wife, "Do you want something to eat?")

47 _____ (Il répond, Elle répond, On répond): (She responds:)

48 Oui, et _____ (je pense, tu penses, il pense, nous pensons) que David a faim aussi. ("Yes, and I think David is hungry, too.")

49 David dit à ses parents : Oui, moi aussi — _____ (peux-tu, pouvez-vous) me faire un sandwich ? (David says to his parents: "Yes, me too, can you make me a sandwich?")

50 _____ (Ils répondent, Elles répondent): (They respond:)

51 Non, _____ (tu peux, vous pouvez) le faire tout seul. ("No, you can do it yourself.")

52 _____ (J'ai, Nous avons) acheté une Sandwichière — ("We bought a sandwich maker —")

53 _____ (il est, elle est, on est) tellement simple à utiliser qu'un enfant peut faire son propre sandwich. ("It's so simple to use that a child can make his own sandwich.")

Answer Key to “Getting to Know You” Practice Questions

- 1 **Bonjour** (*Hello/Good morning*)
- 2 **Salut** (*Hi*)
- 3 **Bonjour** (*Hello/Good morning*)
- 4 **Bonsoir** (*Good evening*)
- 5 **Bonjour** (*Hello/Good afternoon*)
- 6 **Salut** (*Hi*)
- 7 **Salut** (*Hi*)
- 8 **Bonsoir** (*Good evening*)
- 9 **Salut** (*Hi*)
- 10 **Bonjour** (*Hello/Good morning*)
- 11 Yes
- 12 No
- 13 No
- 14 Yes
- 15 Yes
- 16 No
- 17 You: **Bonsoir Mme Anam. Mon prénom est Laura.** (*Good evening Mrs. Anam. My first name is Laura.*)
- 18 **Je vous présente mon ami Shay, et** (*I’d like to introduce you to my friend Shay, and*)
- 19 **Shay, je te présente Mme Anam.** (*Shay, I’d like to introduce you to Mrs. Anam.*)
- 20 Shay: **Bonsoir Mme Anam. Mon nom est Shay Lavee.** (*Good evening Mrs. Anam. My name is Shay Lavee.*)

- 21 You: **Ah, salut Marc ! Est-ce que tu connais cette dame ? Elle s'appelle Mme Anam.** (*Oh, hi Marc! Do you know this lady? Her name is Mrs. Anam.*)

bonjour	je vous en prie
bonjour	au revoir
bonsoir	bonne journée
salut	bonne soirée
s'il te plaît	à la prochaine
s'il vous plaît	je t'en prie

- 22 **je**
- 23 **j'**
- 24 **nous**
- 25 **nous**
- 26 **j'**
- 27 **tu**
- 28 **vous**
- 29 **vous**
- 30 **vous**
- 31 **vous**
- 32 **vous**
- 33 **vous**
- 34 **tu**
- 35 **vous**
- 36 **vous**
- 37 **Il est drôle.** (*He's funny.*)
- 38 **Elle est triste.** (*She's sad.*)
- 39 **Elle est artistique.** (*She's artistic.*)
- 40 **Il est acerbe.** (*He's acerbic.*)
- 41 **Il est énigmatique.** (*He's enigmatic.*)

42 **Elle est honnête.** (*She's honest.*)

43 **j'ai**

44 **Peux-tu**

45 **Nous pouvons**

46 **veux-tu**

47 **Elle répond**

48 **je pense**

49 **pouvez-vous**

50 **Ils répondent**

51 **tu peux**

52 **Nous avons acheté**

53 **elle est**

