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Chapter 1

Getting Down to Basics

Being able to use cardinal and ordinal numbers and recognizing parts of speech are essential French skills. Knowing these basics will help you perfect your oral and written French.

Using Numbers

Numbers are one of the most basic and useful parts of language. In addition to simple counting, you need cardinal numbers for communicating dates, time, prices, phone numbers, addresses, and so much more. You use ordinal numbers to express the number of a floor or the order of a person in a race or competition. We discuss these numbers here.

Counting with cardinal numbers

Cardinal numbers are for counting, and the low numbers are easy. You may already know them backwards and forwards, but if not, all you need to do is memorize them. The higher numbers

get a bit more complicated. Check out the following lists of French numbers, starting with easy ones and moving on to more difficult ones.

Number	French	Number	French
0	zéro	5	cinq
1	un, une	6	six
2	deux	7	sept
3	trois	8	huit
4	quatre	9	neuf

Here are the easier double digits:

Number	French	Number	French
10	dix	40	quarante
11	onze	41	quarante et un quarante-et-un
12	douze	42	quarante-deux
13	treize	43	quarante-trois
14	quatorze	44	quarante-quatre
15	quinze	45	quarante-cinq
16	seize	46	quarante-six
17	dix-sept	47	quarante-sept
18	dix-huit	48	quarante-huit
19	dix-neuf	49	quarante-neuf
20	vingt	50	cinquante
21	vingt et un vingt-et-un	51	cinquante et un cinquante-et-un
22	vingt-deux	52	cinquante-deux
23	vingt-trois	53	cinquante-trois
24	vingt-quatre	54	cinquante-quatre

Number	French	Number	French
25	vingt-cinq	55	cinquante-cinq
26	vingt-six	56	cinquante-six
27	vingt-sept	57	cinquante-sept
28	vingt-huit	58	cinquante-huit
29	vingt-neuf	59	cinquante-neuf
30	trente	60	soixante
31	trente et un trente-et-un	61	soixante et un soixante-et-un
32	trente-deux	62	soixante-deux
33	trente-trois	63	soixante-trois
34	trente-quatre	64	soixante-quatre
35	trente-cinq	65	soixante-cinq
36	trente-six	66	soixante-six
37	trente-sept	67	soixante-sept
38	trente-huit	68	soixante-huit
39	trente-neuf	69	soixante-neuf



REMEMBER

The conjunction **et** (*and*) is used only for the numbers 21, 31, 41, 51, 61, and 71, with or without hyphens. For all other compound numbers through 99, use just a hyphen between the separate words.

Here are the trickier double digits:

Number	French	Number	French
70	soixante-dix	85	quatre-vingt-cinq
71	soixante et onze	86	quatre-vingt-six
72	soixante-douze	87	quatre-vingt-sept
73	soixante-treize	88	quatre-vingt-huit
74	soixante-quatorze	89	quatre-vingt-neuf

Number	French	Number	French
75	soixante-quinze	90	quatre-vingt-dix
76	soixante-seize	91	quatre-vingt-onze
77	soixante-dix-sept	92	quatre-vingt-douze
78	soixante-dix-huit	93	quatre-vingt-treize
79	soixante-dix-neuf	94	quatre-vingt-quatorze
80	quatre-vingts	95	quatre-vingt-quinze
81	quatre-vingt-un	96	quatre-vingt-seize
82	quatre-vingt-deux	97	quatre-vingt-dix-sept
83	quatre-vingt-trois	98	quatre-vingt-dix-huit
84	quatre-vingt-quatre	99	quatre-vingt-dix-neuf

And here are the big numbers:

Number	French	Number	French
100	cent	200	deux cents
1.000	mille	2.000	deux mille
1.000.000	un million	2.000.000	deux millions
1.000.000.000	un milliard	2.000.000.000	deux milliards
1.000.000.000.000	un billion	2.000.000.000.000	deux billions



REMEMBER

Note the following about cardinal numbers:

» **Un** becomes **une** before a feminine noun:

trente et un hommes (31 men)

trente et une femmes (31 women)

» **Quatre-vingts** and the plural **cents** drop the –s before another number:

quatre-vingt-trois pages/deux cent trois pages
(83/203 pages)

but not before another noun.

quatre-vingts pages/deux cents pages (80/200 pages)

- » The indefinite article **un/une** doesn't precede **cent** and **mille**:

cent planètes (100 planets)

mille idées (1,000 ideas)

- » **Mille** doesn't change in the plural:

Six mille étoiles (6,000 stars)

- » **Mille** is sometimes written as **mil** in dates:

Il est né en deux mille douze/deux mil douze.

(He was born in 2012.)

- » **Million**, **milliard** (*billion*), and **billion** (*trillion*) are nouns. They're preceded by **un** (or another number) and are followed by **de** before another noun:

Un million de livres (1,000,000 books)

Deux milliards de dollars (2 billion dollars)



TIP

With numerals and decimals, French uses commas where English uses periods, and vice versa:

English	French
6,000	6.000
0.75	0,75
14.99	14,99

Assigning rank with ordinal numbers

You use *ordinal numbers* — those used to express numbers in a series — far less frequently than cardinal numbers, but they still have some very important applications in everyday life. Table 1-1 presents the French ordinal numbers:

TABLE 1-1 French Ordinal Numbers

English Ordinal	French Ordinal	Abbreviation
1 st	premier, première	1^{er}, 1^{re}
2 nd	deuxième second, seconde	2^e 2^d, 2^{de}
3 rd	troisième	3^e
4 th	quatrième	4^e
5 th	cinquième	5^e
6 th	sixième	6^e
7 th	septième	7^e
8 th	huitième	8^e
9 th	neuvième	9^e
10 th	dixième	10^e

Here's what you need to remember when using ordinal numbers in French:

» **Premier** and **second** are the only ordinal numbers that have a feminine form: **première** and **seconde**:

- **le premier garçon** (*the first boy*)
- **la première fille** (*the first girl*)
- **le second acte** (*the second act*)
- **la seconde pièce** (*the second play*)

» **Second(e)** usually replaces **deuxième** in a series that doesn't go beyond two:

- **son deuxième livre** (*his second book* — there are more than two)
- **son second livre** (*his second book* — he wrote only two)

» Except for **premier** and **second**, ordinal numbers are formed by adding **-ième** to the cardinal numbers. The silent **e** at the end of **quatre**, **onze**, and so on is dropped: **quatre** → **quatrième**.

- » Two additional spelling changes: **u** is added for **cinquième** and **f** changes to **v** for **neuvième**.

Setting the Date

Knowing French calendar words and how to say what day it is makes it easier for you to make appointments, break dates, and plan outings. Here we delve deeper into dates.

Naming the days of the week

The days of the week end in **-di**, except for Sunday, which begins with those two letters.



WARNING

In French, the week starts on Monday, not Sunday, and you don't capitalize the names of days. Here are **les jours de la semaine** (the days of the week):

- » **lundi** (Monday)
- » **mardi** (Tuesday)
- » **mercredi** (Wednesday)
- » **jeudi** (Thursday)
- » **vendredi** (Friday)
- » **samedi** (Saturday)
- » **dimanche** (Sunday)

If you want to know what day of the week it is, ask **Quel jour sommes-nous ?** or **C'est quel jour aujourd'hui ?** You can answer such a question with any of the following phrases followed by the day of the week: **Nous sommes** or **On est**.

Nous sommes mardi. (It's Tuesday.)

To say that something happens once on a certain day, you just use that day with no preposition or article.

Je vais à la banque lundi. (I am going to the bank on Monday.)

To say that something regularly happens on a certain day, you use the definite article.

Je vais à la banque le vendredi. (*I go to the bank on Fridays.*)

Here are some other useful words related to days and weeks:

- » **hier** (*yesterday*)
- » **aujourd'hui** (*today*)
- » **demain** (*tomorrow*)
- » **la semaine dernière/passée** (*last week*)
- » **cette semaine** (*this week*)
- » **la semaine prochaine** (*next week*)

Using the months of the year

You need to know the names of the months in French when writing a letter or making a date. This list shows you the months of the year, which, like the days of the week, aren't capitalized.

- » **janvier** (*January*)
- » **février** (*February*)
- » **mars** (*March*)
- » **avril** (*April*)
- » **mai** (*May*)
- » **juin** (*June*)
- » **juillet** (*July*)
- » **août** (*August*)
- » **septembre** (*September*)
- » **octobre** (*October*)
- » **novembre** (*November*)
- » **décembre** (*December*)

To say that something happened or will happen in a given month, use the preposition **en**:

J'ai acheté ma voiture en juin. (*I bought my car in June.*)

Expressing the date

Every event takes place on a particular date. So if you want to invite or if you're invited, you need to know how to express the date. The first thing to know is the question:

Quelle est la date (d'aujourd'hui) ? (*What's the date [today]?*)

To answer, you can say **Nous sommes**, **On est**, or **C'est** followed by **le** + *cardinal number* + *month* + *year (optional)*. Notice that the day comes before the month and its number has to be preceded by the definite article **le**. For example:

On est le 22 février 2025 [deux mille vingt-cinq].

(*It's February 22, 2025.*)

If you include the day of the week, the article goes before it:

C'est le lundi 3 mai. (*It's Monday May 3.*)



WARNING

Use a cardinal number to say the date in French, except when you're talking about the first day of the month. For that, you use **premier**:

C'est le 1^{er} [premier] décembre. (*It's December 1st.*)



WARNING

In French, when dates are written as numbers, they follow the sequence day/month/year, which may prove confusing to English speakers — especially for dates on or before the 12th of the month. You write *February 9th* as 2/9 in English, but in French it's 9/2!

Telling Time

When writing and speaking French, knowing and telling the time is an important concept, especially when you have an appointment or a train to catch. The first thing you need to know is how to ask what time it is: **Quelle heure est-il ?** The response may be one of the following:

Il est une heure. (*It's one o'clock.*)

Il est deux/quatre/sept heures. (*It's two/four/seven o'clock.*)

Il est midi/minuit. (*It's noon/midnight.*)



WARNING

In France, the 24-hour system is used in public announcements and timetables. So the morning hours are 1 to 12, and the afternoon and evening hours are 13 to 24. To convert back to a 12-hour clock, subtract 12 from any time greater than 12:

Il est quinze heures. (*It's 3 p.m.*)

To express the time after the hour, the number of minutes is added after **heures**:

Il est onze heures dix. (*It's 11:10.*)

Il est quatre heures quarante. (*It's 4:40.*)

Use **et** (*and*) with **quart** and **demie**:

Il est dix heures et quart. (*It's 10:15.*)

Il est une heure et demie. (*It's 1:30.*)

To express the time for the second half of the hour, the number of minutes is subtracted from the next hour:

Il est cinq heures moins vingt. (*It's 4:40.*)

Il est deux heures moins cinq. (*It's 1:55.*)

If it's 15 minutes before the hour, you can also use **moins le quart**:

Il est six heures moins le quart. (*It's quarter to six.*)

If you want to ask at what time an event is taking place, use **à quelle heure**:

À quelle heure est la téléconférence ? (*[At] What time is the conference call?*)

To answer, you just start with that event and add **à** and the time:

La téléconférence est à midi. (*The conference call is at noon.*)

The following shows how to express various times after and before the hour.

Time	French
1:00	une heure
2:05	deux heures cinq
3:10	trois heures dix
4:15	quatre heures et quart
5:20	cinq heures vingt
6:25	six heures vingt-cinq
7:30	sept heures et demie
7:35	huit heures moins vingt-cinq or sept heures trente-cinq
8:40	neuf heures moins vingt or huit heures quarante
9:45	dix heures moins le quart or neuf heures quarante-cinq
10:50	onze heures moins dix or dix heures cinquante
10:55	onze heures moins cinq or dix heures cinquante-cinq
noon	midi
midnight	minuit



REMEMBER

To express half past noon or midnight, use **et demi**:

Il est midi et demi/minuit et demi. (*It's half past noon/half past midnight.*)

Et demie is used to express *half past* with all other times:

Il est une heure et demie. (*It's 1:30.*)

Il est trois heures et demie. (*It's 3:30.*)



TIP

In French, an **h** (short for **heures**) is used where English uses a colon:

14h00 (2:00 p.m.)

8h30 (8:30 a.m.)

Understanding the Parts of Speech

Language is made up of parts of speech — nouns, verbs, adjectives, and so on. Each of these building blocks has its own function and rules, and understanding them is key to using them correctly, particularly with a foreign language. If you don't know the difference between the parts of speech in English, you probably won't understand them in French, either.

Identifying things with nouns and articles

Nouns are people, places, things, and ideas. They're the concrete and abstract things in your sentences, the *who* and the *what* that are doing something or having something done to them. Take a look at the example:

Marie veut vraiment visiter les musées célèbres. (*Marie really wants to visit the famous museums.*)



WARNING

Unlike English nouns, all French nouns have a gender (masculine or feminine). All words you use to qualify or describe a noun must agree with the noun with respect to gender. We discuss this subject in more detail in Chapter 2.

An article is a very particular part of speech that you can use only with a noun. French has three kinds of articles, which we explain in detail in Chapter 2.

Replacing with pronouns

Pronouns are easy to understand; they replace nouns. That is, pronouns also refer to people, places, things, and ideas, but they let you avoid repeating the same words over and over. The following list outlines the pronouns we discuss in this book:

- » *Subject pronouns* (see Chapter 3) are followed by the verb expressing the main action in the sentence (**Je, tu, il, elle, on, nous, vous, ils, elles**):

Tu es sympathique. (*You are nice.*)

- » *Direct object pronouns* (see Chapter 2) replace direct object nouns; they answer who or what the subject is acting upon. The direct object pronouns are **me, te, le, la, nous, vous, and les**:

Il te voit. (*He sees you.*)

- » *Indirect object pronouns* (see Chapter 2) replace indirect object nouns; they explain to or for whom something is done. They are **me, te, lui, nous, vous, and leur**:

Il lui a écrit. (*He wrote to her/him.*)

- » *Adverbial pronouns* (see Chapter 2) **y** and **en** have numerous uses that are explained in detail in Chapter 2.

- » *Reflexive pronouns* (see Chapter 3) show that the subject is acting upon itself (**me, te, se, nous, and vous**):

Elle se regarde dans le miroir. (*She is looking at herself in the mirror.*)

- » *Prepositional pronouns*, also called stressed pronouns (see Chapter 5), are commonly used after prepositions: **moi, toi, lui, elle, nous, vous, eux, and elles**:

Ils vont au cinéma sans moi. (*They're going to the movies without me.*)

- » *Interrogative pronouns* (see Chapter 6) ask a question (*who, which, what*, and so on):

Qui est-ce ? (*Who is that?*)

Moving along with verbs

A verb is a part of speech that describes an action or a state of being. In French, verbs change from their infinitive form (in other words, they're *conjugated*) as follows:

- » To agree with the person performing the action (I, you, he, she, it, we, they).
- » To indicate the time when the action was performed (past, present, future).

- » To indicate the mood (subjunctive, imperative, conditional, indicative) of the action.

French verbs are classified by how they're conjugated:

- » Regular verbs: **-er** verbs, **-ir** verbs, and **-re** verbs
- » Spelling-change verbs
- » Stem-changing verbs
- » Irregular verbs
- » Pronominal verbs



REMEMBER

The *infinitive* of the verb is its basic form — its “to” form before it’s conjugated: **danser** (to dance), **finir** (to finish), **répondre** (to answer). Regular French infinitives have three different endings, and you conjugate them according to these endings (**-er**, **-ir**, and **-re**). We give you lots more information about verbs in Chapters 3, 7, 8, and 9.

Modifying with adjectives

Adjectives may be flowery words that describe nouns:

Je veux visiter les musées célèbres. (I want to visit the famous museums.)

But adjectives aren’t only descriptive; they come in many other useful varieties:

- » Demonstrative adjectives: **ce**, **cet**, **cette** (this/that), **ces** (these/those) — see Chapter 2
- » Possessive adjectives: **mon** (my), **ton** (your), **son** (his/her/its), and so forth — see Chapter 2
- » Interrogative adjectives: **quel**, **quelle**, **quels**, **quelles** (which/what) — see Chapter 6



WARNING

Unlike English adjectives, French adjectives have masculine, feminine, singular, and plural forms so that they can agree with nouns. (Chapter 4 tells you lots of other interesting details about adjectives.)

Qualifying with adverbs

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. In this example sentence, *really* modifies the verb *want*:

Je veux vraiment aller en France. (*I really want to go to France.*)

English adverbs often end in *-ly* and indicate how the action of a verb is occurring: happily, quickly, rudely. Most of these words are *adverbs of manner*. The other kinds of adverbs are

- » Adverbs of frequency: **jamais** (*never*), **souvent** (*often*)
- » Adverbs of place: **ici** (*here*), **partout** (*everywhere*)
- » Adverbs of quantity: **beaucoup** (*a lot*), **très** (*very*)
- » Adverbs of time: **avant** (*before*), **demain** (*tomorrow*)
- » Interrogative adverbs: **quand** (*when*), **où** (*where*)

Read Chapter 4 thoroughly to understand more about French adverbs.

Connecting with prepositions

A *preposition* is the part of speech you put in front of a noun or pronoun to show the relationship between that word and another word or phrase. Prepositions tell you how verbs and nouns fit together. Prepositions may be one word (to, at, about) or part of a group of words (next to, in front of, on top of):

Je veux aller en France. (*I want to go to France.*)

Prepositions aren't like a vocabulary list that you can just memorize. Instead, they're grammatical terms with various functions that you have to study and practice. Chapter 5 explains all about prepositions.

