Welcome to the world of Italian verbs! I recently noticed, while reading an Italian children’s story to my young daughter, that we expose young people at a very early age to all the verbs and tenses of a language. Evidently, when we learn a language naturally, from a young age, we don’t learn to speak and master one tense and then move to another and another and so on; rather, we learn all the tenses together. Alas, you, the reader, are probably not a youngster. Therefore, I generally throw one tense at a time at you, but you should note that in authentic language construction, you may very well have several tenses going on at the same time.

One of the goals of this book is to help you feel at ease in all the tenses and constructions (individually and collectively) so that you can pass easily from one to the other without getting bogged down in wondering about conjugation and meaning. But every book has a beginning, and you’ve found a good place to start here. In this chapter, I break down the types of Italian verbs you’ll see in this book. I let you in on how pronouns fit in. And I conclude with an introduction to the tenses and moods at work in the Italian language.

Breaking Down Italian Verbs

In Italian, just like in English, every verb has an infinitive (or infinito) form — the infinitive is the form of the verb you’d find if you looked it up in the dictionary. English often couples infinitives with the word to, as in to eat or to drink. In Italian, you can identify infinitive verb forms because they all end in -are, -ere, or -ire, as in mangiare (to eat), leggere (to read), and dormire (to sleep).

Infinitives are amazing bridges when learning Italian! Many nouns and adjectives are derived from verbs, so when you learn a verb, you often learn a noun and an adjective at the same time! For example, the noun “lavoro,” which means a job, derives from the verb lavorare, which means to work. In Appendix A, you can find over 500 common Italian infinitives. Start familiarizing yourself with them right away and go back to the Appendix whenever you come upon a verb that you don’t recognize.

All infinitives in Italian fall under three main verb types, also known as conjugations. I usually just call them -are, -ere, and -ire verbs:

- First Conjugation verbs have infinitives that end in -are. Some common examples of -are verbs include parlare (to speak), giocare (to play), and telefonare (to call, to telephone).


**Second Conjugation** verbs have infinitives that end in *-ere*. Some common examples include *prendere* (to take, to have), *ripetere* (to repeat), and *mettere* (to put).

**Third Conjugation** verbs have infinitives that end in *-ire*. Some common examples are *partire* (to depart), *capire* (to understand), and *aprire* (to open).

In addition to the infinitive form, each verb also has its own stem (or root). The stem of the infinitive is what you have left after you take the *-are*, *-ere*, or *-ire* ending off of it. For example:

- With First Conjugation verbs like *parlare* (to speak), the stem is *parl-*.
- With Second Conjugation verbs like *prendere* (to take, to have), the stem is *prend-*.
- With Third Conjugation verbs like *capire* (to understand), the stem is *cap-*.

Most stems follow this pattern and are regular. When you come upon an irregular stem in this book, though, I'll let you know that it doesn't follow this simple pattern. Stems are essential because they are the structures to which you attach the different verb endings of the different tenses. And most tenses use these stems (with the exception of the future and conditional tenses, which we get to in Chapters 10 and 11).

You can classify Italian verbs into these four broad categories:

- **Regular**: Regular verbs follow the standard verb conjugations for *-are*, *-ere*, and *-ire* verbs. (Check out Chapter 2 for a further introduction to regular verbs.)
- **Irregular**: The Italian language contains many challenging irregular verbs that don't follow a pattern of standard endings. Therefore, you need to memorize them (see Chapters 3 and 4).
- **Stem-changing**: Some verbs require a spelling modification or a stem adjustment, and I point these out to you throughout the book. You can find many of these verbs in Chapters 2 and 3.
- **Reflexive**: Reflexive verbs are conjugated just like *-are*, *-ere*, and *-ire* verbs — in all of the tenses. The one caveat is that reflexive verbs require their own set of reflexive pronouns. (I cover reflexive verbs in detail in Chapter 5.)

Here's your chance to review some verb infinitives before you jump into conjugations. Flip to Appendix A (if you don't know the verb already) and provide the translation of the following 15 verbs. Here's an example to get you started:

**Q.** eleggere

**A.** to elect

| 1. dedurre | 9. litigare |
| 2. trascinare | 10. sentire |
| 3. spingere | 11. dimagrire |
| 4. bere | 12. appartenere |
| 5. avvertire | 13. ricordare |
| 6. sopportare | 14. opporsi |
| 7. concedere | 15. fermarsi |
| 8. accontentarsi di |
Meeting the Personal Pronouns Face to Face

Italian verb conjugations feature three singular persons and three plural persons. Each verb, when conjugated, must correspond to a person. Additionally, a personal pronoun can substitute as the subject of a sentence. One of your main jobs is to know what personal pronoun to use and what person to conjugate your verb into; therefore, getting the pronouns down should be one of your first steps. Table 1-1 presents the pronouns that correspond to the three singular persons and the three plural persons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1-1</th>
<th>Classifying Subject Pronouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject Pronoun</strong></td>
<td><strong>Singular Subject Pronouns</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classification</strong></td>
<td><strong>io (I)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Person</td>
<td>tu (you, familiar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person</td>
<td>lui (he), lei (she), Lei (you, formal)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because you conjugate verbs according to the subjects that accompany them in Italian, the personal pronouns are redundant. So, after you master the personal pronouns, you don’t really need to include them anymore, except in cases of emphasis. For example: “Mio marito preferisce restare a Ravenna tutta l’estate; io preferisco viaggiare.” (My husband prefers to stay in Ravenna all summer; I prefer to travel.) In this example, the “io” adds emphasis and contrasts what the husband prefers with what the speaker prefers; the “io” really means I, on the other hand . . .

Many students often get confused between the tu and Lei and the voi and Loro (because they all translate into you in English). Distinguishing between these constructions isn’t as difficult as it first appears. Here are a few ways you can keep things straight:

✔ You use tu when speaking directly to one person with whom you’re familiar (friends, children, and relatives, for example).

“Tina, (tu) mangi a casa sabato?” (Tina, are you eating at home on Saturday?) **Note:** The tu isn’t necessary in this sentence; I just add it to drive home the point that when you’re on a first-name basis with someone, you use the tu form of the verb.

✔ You use Lei when speaking with someone whom you don’t know very well or whom you may be meeting for the first time (anyone in a restaurant, hotel, post office, or shop, for example, or with professors and older people).

“Professore, (Lei) può ripetere per favore?” (Professor, would you please repeat?) In this example, you’re speaking to a professor, so you must use the Lei person.

✔ You use voi when speaking directly to more than one person.

“Mamma e papà, (voi) dove andate?” (Mom and Dad, where are you going?) In this example, the subject is you plural, or voi (you’re speaking to your Mom and Dad), so the verb has to be in the voi person as well.

✔ You use Loro very rarely. In fact, I include it in only a couple of exercises throughout the book. You hear the Loro person under formal circumstances, such as when you check into a hotel, and in the Loro command form (see Chapter 5).

“Mi scusino!” (Excuse me!) Here you are speaking formally to more than one person.
In any exercise in this book, when you see a person’s name followed by a comma, a lightbulb should go off in your head! This construction is your cue that the sentence is in direct discourse, which means you need to use the tu person, the Lei person, or the voi person verb form, according to the context. (You don’t have to worry about the Loro person for the most part.)

In this exercise, identify what pronouns you’d use to speak about the following people. Here’s an example:

Q. your doctor _________________
A. lui

16. your daughter _________________
17. your students _________________
18. yourself _________________
19. your son _________________
20. my mom and me _________________

For this exercise, identify what pronoun you’d use to speak to the following people. Here’s an example:

Q. your doctor _________________
A. Lei

26. your sister _________________
27. your students _________________
28. your best friends _________________

21. you and your family _________________
22. your children _________________
23. your girlfriend _________________
24. you and your wife _________________
25. your husband _________________

29. hotel concierge _________________
30. your grandmother _________________

Other Ways to Classify Verbs and Amaze Your Friends

You can use the contents of this section to amaze your friends (if they’re really into Italian, I guess)! Okay, now that I have your attention, I’m going to cover some other pigeonholes and categories that people place various Italian verbs into. I use the terms I cover here throughout the book, so you can always turn back to this section if you get tripped up.

Tenses are verb inflections, or conjugations, that denote specific time distinctions, like the present, the past, and future, for example. However, there are two overarching types of tenses:

- **Simple**: A simple tense is made up of one verb only.
- **Compound**: A compound tense is made up of two verbs. The most common construction for compound tenses in Italian uses the auxiliary verb avere or essere (in whatever tense you need it) + a past participle.
All verbs are either transitive or intransitive (see Chapter 14 for the full story on distinguishing between transitive and intransitive verbs):

**Transitive:** Transitive verbs may be accompanied by direct objects. They take the auxiliary verb *avere* (*to have*) when conjugated in a compound tense.

**Intransitive:** Intransitive verbs take the auxiliary verb *essere* (*to be*) when conjugated in a compound tense.

*Moods* provide you with another way of distinguishing how to conjugate the verb. Each mood has its own set of tenses:

**Indicative:** Verb tenses in the indicative mood express a fact or a certainty. The following tenses can be grouped under the indicative mood:

- **Present** (*Il presente*). Simple tense. Includes reflexive verbs. See Chapters 2 through 5.
- **Present perfect** (*Il passato prossimo*). Compound tense. Includes reflexive verbs. See Chapters 14 and 15.
- **Imperfect** (*L'imperfetto*). Simple tense. See Chapter 8.
- **Past perfect** (*Il passato remoto*). Simple tense. See Chapter 9.
- **Past anterior** (*Il trapassato remoto*). Compound tense.
- **Future** (*Il futuro*). Simple tense. See Chapter 10.
- **Future perfect** (*Il futuro anteriore*). Simple tense. See Chapter 16.
- **Present progressive** (*Il presente progressivo*). Formed with *stare* + gerund, so, in a way, a compound tense. See Chapter 23.
- **Imperfect progressive** (*L'imperfetto progressivo*). Formed with *stare* + gerund, so, in a way, a compound tense. See Chapter 23.

**Subjunctive:** Verb tenses in the subjunctive mood express doubt or uncertainty:

- **Present subjunctive** (*Il congiuntivo presente*). Simple tense. See Chapter 12.
- **Past subjunctive** (*Il congiuntivo passato*). Compound tense. See Chapter 19.
- **Past perfect subjunctive** (*Il trapassato congiuntivo*). Compound tense. See Chapter 20.

**Imperative:** The imperative is the command form. I cover it in Chapter 6.

**Conditional:** Verbs in conditional forms imply a condition or a supposition; in English, the conditional corresponds to the word *would* + a verb:

- **Conditional** (*Il condizionale*). Simple tense. See Chapter 11.
- **Past conditional** (*Il condizionale passato*). Compound tense. See Chapter 17.

You can find a wealth of information about Italian at your fingertips through the Internet. Just search for topics that interest you (newspapers, literature, music, summer attractions in specific towns [most towns have official Web sites], museums, cooking schools, and so on). You can hunker down with some Italian films in the evening. You can also find yourself an Italian pen pal to help you practice your Italian in concrete terms.
Part I: Speaking of the Present

Answer Key

1. dedurre to deduce
2. trascinare to drag
3. spingere to push
4. bere to drink
5. avvertire to inform, to warn
6. sopportare to be able, to stand
7. concedere to concede, to allow
8. accontentarsi di to be satisfied with
9. litigare to argue
10. sentire to hear, to feel, to smell, to listen to
11. dimagrire to lose weight
12. appartenere to belong
13. ricordare to remember
14. opporsi to oppose
15. fermarsi to stop

Lei
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Loro
Io
Lui
Noi
Voi
Noi
Noi
Lei
Voi
Voi
Lei
Tu