

Chapter 1

The French You Already Know

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In This Chapter

- ▶ French words that are identical or similar to their English counterparts
 - ▶ French words to watch out for
 - ▶ Idioms and popular expressions you may already know
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Learning a new language can be challenging. Not only do you need to know a whole new vocabulary, but you also need to twist your head around different grammar rules and your tongue around different pronunciation rules. But here's a little news that may make the task seem a little less daunting: You already know quite a few French words and expressions. How? Because the English language, being the borrower that it is, contains many French words and expressions, and French has absorbed some English words, too.

In this chapter, you get to explore some French words and phrases without having to know pronunciation or grammar rules (that info comes in Chapters 2 and 3). Here, we include French words that are spelled the same and mean the same as their English counterparts, as well as words that are close in meaning and spelling. But because not every French word that resembles an English word shares its meaning, we also tell you what words to watch out for. In addition, we include some French expressions that you probably already know and understand. By the end of this chapter, you may discover that you actually know more French than you previously thought.

The French You're Familiar With

With just a narrow stretch of water between them, the English and the French have historically been pretty close, even if they haven't always been the friendly allies they are today. In fact, French was the language of the English court for a very long time – a fact that many people tend to forget. (The Normans who invaded England in 1066 with William the Conqueror were French, as were some of the most prominent people in English history).

What does this have to do with your learning French? Well today, about 35 percent of English vocabulary is of French origin. That being the case, you already know an impressive amount of French, whether you realize it or not. The only pitfall you have to watch out for is that sometimes the English words have a different meaning from their French counterparts, and they almost certainly have a different pronunciation.



French nouns are preceded by either definite or indefinite articles. The definite articles are **le** (masculine), **la** (feminine), **l'** (an abbreviation of either **le** or **la**), and **les** (plural); these are the equivalent to the English word *the*. The indefinite articles are **un** (masculine), **une** (feminine), **des** (plural); these are all equivalent to the English words *a*, *an*, or *some*. As you learn French, knowing which articles go with what nouns helps you identify the noun's gender; that's why we include the articles with the nouns in the lists throughout this book. Because the abbreviated article **l'** obscures the noun's gender, we added the gender in parentheses. Finally, because the articles are not always used in English translations, we don't include them in the translations of the word lists: **l'université** (f) (lew-nee-vehr-see-tey) (*university*) and **le kiosque** (luh kyohhsk) (*kiosk*), for example.

Friendly allies – bons alliés

Several French words are spelled the same and have the same meaning as their English counterparts. The only thing that may be different is the pronunciation (for more on pronunciation guidelines, head to Chapter 3). Take a look at these **bons alliés** (bohN-zah-lyey) (*friendly allies*):

- ✔ **l'art** (m) (lahr)
- ✔ **brave** (brahv)
- ✔ **le bureau** (luh bew-roh)
- ✔ **le client** (luh klee-yahN)
- ✔ **le concert** (luh kohN-sehr)
- ✔ **la condition** (lah kohN-dee-syohN)
- ✔ **content** (kohN-tahN)
- ✔ **le courage** (luh kooh-rahzh)
- ✔ **le cousin** (luh kooh-zaN)
- ✔ **la culture** (lah kewl-tewr)
- ✔ **différent** (dee-fey-rahN)
- ✔ **excellent** (ehk-seh-lahN)
- ✔ **le garage** (luh gah-rahzh)
- ✔ **le guide** (luh geed)
- ✔ **important** (aN-pohr-tahN)
- ✔ **le journal** (luh zhoohr-nahl)
- ✔ **la machine** (lah mah-sheen)
- ✔ **le message** (luh mey-sahzh)
- ✔ **le moment** (luh moh-mahN)
- ✔ **la nation** (lah nah-syohN)
- ✔ **la nièce** (lah nyehs)
- ✔ **l'orange** (f) (loh-rahNzh)
- ✔ **le parent** (luh pah-rahN)
- ✔ **possible** (poh-see-bluh)
- ✔ **principal** (praN-see-pahl)
- ✔ **probable** (proh-bah-bluh)
- ✔ **la question** (lah kehs-tyohN)
- ✔ **la radio** (lah rah-dyoh)
- ✔ **le restaurant** (luh rehs-toh-rahN)
- ✔ **la rose** (lah rohzh)

- ✓ **rouge** (roohzh)
- ✓ **la route** (lah rooht)
- ✓ **la science** (lah syahNs)
- ✓ **le secret** (luh suh-kreh)
- ✓ **le service** (luh sehr-vees)
- ✓ **le signal** (luh see-nyahl)
- ✓ **le silence** (luh see-lahNs)
- ✓ **la solitude** (lah soh-lee-tewd)
- ✓ **le sport** (luh spohr)
- ✓ **la station** (lah stah-syohN)
- ✓ **la statue** (lah stah-tew)
- ✓ **la suggestion** (lah sewg-zheh-styohN)
- ✓ **la surprise** (lah sewr-preez)
- ✓ **la table** (lah tah-bluh)
- ✓ **le taxi** (luh tah-ksee)
- ✓ **le tennis** (luh tey-nees)
- ✓ **le train** (luh traN)
- ✓ **urgent** (ewr-zhahN)
- ✓ **violet** (vyoh-leh)
- ✓ **le voyage** (luh voh-yahzh)
- ✓ **le zoo** (luh zooh)

Kissing cousins

Some French words, while not identical in spelling to their English counterparts, look very similar. These words also have similar meanings. Table 1-1 shows words that fit into this category.

Table 1-1 Words Similar in Meaning,
Slightly Different in Spelling

<i>French</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>English</i>
l'acteur (m) (lahk-tuhr)	<i>actor</i>	l'hôtel (m) (loh-tehl)	<i>hotel</i>
l'adresse (f) (lah-drehs)	<i>address</i>	le kiosque (luh kyohhsk)	<i>kiosk</i>
l'aéroport (m) (lah-eyr-oh-pohr)	<i>airport</i>	la lampe (lah lahmp)	<i>lamp</i>
l'allée (f) (lah-ley)	<i>alley</i>	la lettre (lah leh-truh)	<i>letter</i>
l'Américain (m)/ l'Américaine (f) (lah-mey-ree-kaN/lah-mey-ree-kehn)	<i>American</i>	la mémoire (lah mey-mwahr)	<i>memory</i>
l'âge (m) (lahzh)	<i>age</i>	le miroir (luh mee-rwahr)	<i>mirror</i>
l'artiste (m/f) (lahr-teest)	<i>artist</i>	la musique (lah mew-zeek)	<i>music</i>
la banque (lah bahNk)	<i>bank</i>	la nationalité (lah nah-syoh-nah-lee-tey)	<i>nationality</i>
la cathédrale (lah kah-tey-drahl)	<i>cathedral</i>	nécessaire (ney-sey-sehr)	<i>necessary</i>
le chèque (luh shehk)	<i>check</i>	ordinaire (ohr-dee-nehr)	<i>ordinary</i>
la classe (lah klahs)	<i>class</i>	le papier (luh pah-pyey)	<i>paper</i>
la chambre (lah shahN-bruh)	<i>chamber, bedroom</i>	le poème (luh poh-ehm)	<i>poem</i>
la comédie (lah koh-mey-dee)	<i>comedy</i>	potentiel (poh-tahN-syehl)	<i>potential</i>
le congrès (luh kohN-greh)	<i>congress</i>	le problème (luh proh-blehm)	<i>problem</i>

(continued)

Table 1-1 (continued)

<i>French</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>English</i>
la crème (lah krehm)	<i>cream</i>	le professeur (luh proh-feh-suhr)	<i>teacher/ professor</i>
la démocratie (lah dey-moh-krah-see)	<i>democracy</i>	le sénateur (luh sey-nah-tuhr)	<i>senator</i>
le développement (luh dey-vlohp-mahN)	<i>development</i>	le succès (luh sew-kseh)	<i>success</i>
la famille (lah fah-meey)	<i>family</i>	la terrasse (lah teh-rahs)	<i>terrace</i>
la géographie (lah zhey-oh-grah-fee)	<i>geography</i>	la tragédie (lah trah-zhey-dee)	<i>tragedy</i>
le gouvernement (luh gooh-vehr-nuh-mahN)	<i>government</i>	l'université (f) (lew-nee-vehr-see-tey)	<i>university</i>
l'histoire (f) (lee-stwahr)	<i>history</i>	la visite (lah vee-zeet)	<i>visit</i>

False friends – faux amis

Some French words are **faux amis** (foh-zah-mee) (*false friends*). They look similar to English words, but they don't have the same meaning. Misusing these words can be quite confusing. For example, if you tell someone that your young adult son or daughter is in a **collège** (koh-lehzh), they'd probably look at you – or your child – strangely because the French word **collège** means *middle school*, not *university*. The following list shows some of these easy-to-confuse words:

- ✓ **actuellement** (ahk-tew-ehl-mahN): This word means *now*, not *actually*. The French word for *actually* is **en fait** (ahN feht).
- ✓ **assister à** (ah-sees-tey ah): This word means *to attend*, not *to assist*. The French word for *to assist* is **aider** (ey-dey).

- ✔ **attendre** (ah-tahN-druh): This word means *to wait for*, not *to attend*. The French word for *to attend* is **assister à** (ah-sees-tey ah).
- ✔ **la bague** (lah bahg): This word means *ring* (the kind you wear on your finger), not *bag*. The French word for *bag* is **le sac** (luh sahk).
- ✔ **blessé** (bleh-sey): This word means *to wound* or *to hurt*. The French word for *to bless* is **bénir** (bey-neer).
- ✔ **la cave** (lah kahv): The French word **cave** means *cellar* in French. The word for *cave* is **la grotte** (lah grohht) in French.
- ✔ **le collègue** (luh koh-lehzh) means *middle school*; use the French word **l'université** (f) (lew-nee-vehr-see-tey) when you want to say *college*.
- ✔ **formidable** (fohr-mee-dah-bluh): This word means *wonderful* or *tremendous*, not *fearsome* or *daunting*. To say *formidable* in French, you use the word **redoutable** (ruh-dooht-tah-bluh).
- ✔ **la lecture** (lah leh-ktewr): This word means *a reading*, as in a reading of Balzac's novels. The word for *lecture* is **la conférence** (lah kohN-fey-rahNs).
- ✔ **la librairie** (lah lee-brey-ree): This word means *bookstore*, not *library*. The French word for *library* is **la bibliothèque** (lah bee-blee-oh-tehk).
- ✔ **la place** (lah plahs): This word means *square*, *seat at the theater*, or *seat on the bus*, not *place*. The French word for *place* is **le lieu** (luh lyuh) or **l'endroit** (m) (lahN-drwah).
- ✔ **rester** (reh-s-tey): This word means *to stay* or *to remain*, not *to rest*. The French word for *to rest* is **se reposer** (suh-ruh-poh-zey).
- ✔ **sympathique** (saN-pah-teek): This word means *nice*. To say *sympathetic* in French, you say **compatissant(e)** (kohN-pah-tee-sahN[t]).
- ✔ **la veste** (lah vehst): This word means *jacket* in French, not *vest* or *waistcoat*. The French word for *vest* is **le gilet** (luh zhee-leh).

Borrowed English words

The preceding sections note quite a few English words that have been borrowed from French and that have retained their French meaning, even though the pronunciation is different.

But English isn't the only language that's nicked a few words. French has also borrowed many words from English and continues to do so in spite of the loud protest by purists who condemn this trend as a sign of cultural contamination and name it **franglais** (frahN-gleh): Here is a list of some of the terms borrowed from English and absorbed into the French language. Note the different pronunciation:

- ✔ **le budget** (luh bewd-zeh)
- ✔ **le business** (luh beez-nehs)
- ✔ **le camping** (luh kahN-peeng)
- ✔ **le chewing-gum** (luh shweeng-gohhm)
- ✔ **les chips** (ley sheep[s])
- ✔ **le coca** (luh koh-kah)
- ✔ **cool** (koohl)
- ✔ **le fast food** (luh fahst foohd)
- ✔ **le hamburger** (luh ahm-boohr-guhr)
- ✔ **le jet set** (luh jeht seht)
- ✔ **le manager** (luh mah-nah-jehr)
- ✔ **le marketing** (luh mahr-kuh-teeng)
- ✔ **le parking** (luh pahr-keen)
- ✔ **le rock** (luh rohk) (as in rock music)
- ✔ **le shopping** (luh shoh-peeng)
- ✔ **le steak** (luh stehk)
- ✔ **le chat** (luh chaht)
- ✔ **le tunnel** (luh tew-nehl)
- ✔ **le week-end** (luh wee-kehnd)



Quebec is pure French

The rules of good and pure French speech are especially enforced in Quebec. People in Quebec will easily understand your **franglais**, but you may be taken aback when you hear Quebecers talk about the following, where the French use the English word:

- ✓ **la fin de semaine** (lah faN duh suh-mehn) (*weekend*)
- ✓ **un hambourgeois** (uhN ahN-boohr-zhwah) (*hamburger*)
- ✓ **le magasinage** (luh mah-gah-zee-nazh) (*shopping*)
- ✓ **la mise en marché** (lah mee-zahN mahr-shey) (*marketing*)
- ✓ **le stationnement** (luh stah-syoh-nuh-mahN) (*parking*)

Quebec's purism is easily explained:

- ✓ The proximity of the United States south of its border, plus

the English-speaking majority in Canada threatens the French cultural identity of Quebec's 7.5 million inhabitants. For Quebecers, their language constitutes a rampart against the all-powerful presence of the English – spoken by 300 million people – surrounding them.

- ✓ People who lived mostly in rural isolation for 300 years are now living in modern cities like Montreal, Quebec, Sherbrooke, and a few others where cable TV is constantly bombarding them with American commercials, movies, and a variety of shows. These people are trying to preserve the French language.

Although protective of their language, French-Canadians are an extremely friendly people.

Idioms and Popular Expressions

French, like English, has many *idioms* (unusual ways of expressing feelings and ideas). You may find the meaning of these expressions puzzling if you try to translate them word for word.

These fixed forms of expression belong specifically to the language in question. If you walk up to a French person and say **Il pleut des chats et des chiens** (eel pluh dey shah ey dey shyaN) (*It's raining cats and dogs*), he or she would question

your sanity. On the other hand, you may find yourself wondering what a French speaker means when she says **Il tombe des cordes** (eel tohNb dey kohrd), whose literal translation is *Ropes are falling*, but it's roughly equivalent to *It's raining cats and dogs*.

Apart from those idioms, which take a long time to comprehend and belong specifically to a culture, every language has many expressions and phrases that, although they cannot be translated word for word, can easily be learned and used. Here are a few of the useful expressions you frequently hear in French:

- ✔ **À la vôtre!** (ah lah voh-truh!) (*Cheers!*)
- ✔ **À mon avis** (ah mohN-nah-vee) (*in my opinion*)
- ✔ **À tes/vos souhaits!** (ah tey/voh sweh!) (*Bless you!/ Gesundheit!*)
- ✔ **Allez! Un petit effort!** (ah-ley! uhN puh-tee-teh-fohr!) (*Come on! Try a little!*)
- ✔ **Bien sûr.** (byaN sewr.) (*Of course.*)
- ✔ **Bon appétit!** (bohN-nah-pey-tee!) (*Enjoy your meal!*)
- ✔ **Ça vaut la peine/le coup.** (sah voh lah pehn/luh kohh.) (*It's worth it.*)
- ✔ **D'accord.** (dah-kohr.) (*Okay.*)
- ✔ **De rien.** (duh ryaN.) (*Don't mention it.*)
- ✔ **Jamais de la vie!** (zhah-meh duh lah vee!) or **Pas question!** (pah kehs-tyohN!) (*No way!*)
- ✔ **Revenons à nos moutons.** (ruh-vuh-nohN ah noh mooh-tohN.) (*Let's get back to the subject at hand.*)
- ✔ **Tant mieux.** (tahN myuh.) (*So much the better.*)
- ✔ **Tant pis.** (tahN pee.) (*Too bad.*)
- ✔ **Tout à fait.** (tooh-tah feh.) (*Quite.*)
- ✔ **Un coup d'oeil** (uhN kohh duhy) (*a glance, a quick look*)