

The
Oxford
Guide to the
French
Language

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TENSE FORMATION

The tenses of French verbs are either *simple*, in which case the verb is a single word, or *compound*, in which case it is normally formed from a part of the verb **avoir**, *to have*, followed by the past participle:

simple tense: **je porte**, *I wear*

compound tense: **j'ai porté**, *I have worn*

Regular verbs, what they are

Most French verbs are **regular**—that is they follow an entirely predictable pattern. The pattern they follow is determined by the way their infinitive ends. They divide into three groups (known as conjugations), each with its own infinitive ending:

porter, *to wear*, first conjugation

finir, *to finish*, second conjugation

vendre, *to sell*, third conjugation

Most French verbs belong to the first conjugation, whose infinitives all end in **-er**. All invented new verbs are automatically first conjugation verbs. Verbs in the second conjugation all have an infinitive ending **-ir**, and those in the very small third conjugation all have an infinitive ending **-re**.

Irregular verbs, what they are

Some French verbs are **irregular**, following no pattern. In the simple tenses there is no way of predicting their

stems (the part of the verb to which endings are added) or, quite frequently, the endings that are added to them. In the compound tenses, however, it is only the past participle which is irregular. So, for example, with **vouloir** (irregular), *to want*:

<i>present (simple tense)</i>	<i>perfect (compound tense)</i>
je veux	j'ai voulu
tu veux	tu as voulu
il veut	il a voulu
nous voulons	nous avons voulu
vous voulez	vous avez voulu
ils veulent	ils ont voulu

► There is a table of all the common irregular verbs with their conjugation on page 242.

Simple-tense formation, regular verbs

To form each simple tense a fixed set of endings is added to the verb's stem. The stem is the infinitive minus its **-er**, **-ir** or **-re** ending. Each conjugation has a different set of verb endings.

porter → **port-** → **je porte**, *I wear*
finir → **fin-** → **je finis**, *I finish*
vendre → **vend-** → **je vends**, *I sell*

The ending of the verb corresponds to the subject of the verb:

je finis, *I finish*
il finit, *he finishes*

► The complete tense-formation of regular verbs is given on pp. 4–12, with the verb endings printed in bold.

Compound-tense formation, all verbs

To form a compound tense you need to know a verb's past participle. The past participle of a regular verb is

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formed by removing the **-er**, **-ir**, or **-re** of the infinitive. To this stem is added **-é** (first conjugation), **-i** (second conjugation), or **-u** (third conjugation):

<i>infinitive</i>		<i>past participle</i>
porter	→	porté
finir	→	fini
vendre	→	vendu

The tenses of **avoir** used to form the compound tenses are:

perfect tense:

present of **avoir**: j'**ai** porté

pluperfect tense:

imperfect of **avoir**: j'**avais** porté

future perfect tense:

future of **avoir**: j'**aurai** porté

conditional perfect tense:

conditional of **avoir**: j'**aurais** porté

past anterior tense:

past historic of **avoir**: j'**eus** porté

perfect subjunctive:

present subjunctive of **avoir**: j'**ale** porté

pluperfect subjunctive:

imperfect subjunctive of **avoir**: j'**eusse** porté

► Some very common French verbs form their compound tenses with **être** instead of **avoir**. See p. 12.

► In all the compound tenses the past participle may sometimes agree with its subject or its direct object, in gender and in number. See p. 14.

CONJUGATION OF -er VERBS

(First-conjugation verbs)

In all tenses **elle** (*she*), **on** (*one*) and singular nouns are followed by the **il** form of the verb; **elles** (*they, feminine*)

and plural nouns are followed by the **ils** form of the verb.

infinitive	porter, to wear
present participle	portant, wearing
past participle	porté, worn
imperative	porte, wear...! portons, let's wear... portez, wear...!

Simple tenses

present tense, <i>I wear, I am wearing</i>	je porte tu portes il porte	nous portons vous portez ils portent
imperfect tense, <i>I wore, I was wearing, I used to wear</i>	je portais tu portais il portait	nous portions vous portiez ils portaient
past historic tense, <i>I wore</i>	je portai tu portas il porta	nous portâmes vous portâtes ils portèrent
future tense, <i>I shall wear, I shall be wearing</i>	je porterai tu porteras il portera	nous porterons vous porterez ils porteront
conditional tense, <i>I should wear</i>	je porterais tu porterais il porterait	nous porterions vous porteriez ils porteraient
present subjunctive, <i>I wear, I may wear</i>	je porte tu portes il porte	nous portions vous portiez ils portent
imperfect subjunctive*, <i>I wore, I might wear</i>	je portasse tu portasses il portât	nous portassions vous portassiez ils portassent

* archaic or literary

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Compound tenses

perfect tense, <i>I wore, I have worn, I have been wearing</i>	j'ai porté tu as porté il a porté	nous avons porté vous avez porté ils ont porté
pluperfect tense, <i>I had worn, I had been wearing</i>	j'avais porté tu avais porté il avait porté	nous avions porté vous aviez porté ils avaient porté
future perfect tense, <i>I shall have worn, I shall have been wearing</i>	j'aurai porté tu auras porté il aura porté	nous aurons porté vous aurez porté ils auront porté
conditional perfect tense, <i>I should have worn</i>	j'aurais porté tu aurais porté il aurait porté	nous aurions porté vous auriez porté ils auraient porté
past anterior tense*, <i>I had worn</i>	j'eus porté tu eus porté il eut porté	nous eûmes porté vous eûtes porté ils eurent porté
perfect subjunctive, <i>I wore, I may have worn</i>	j'aie porté tu aies porté il ait porté	nous ayons porté vous ayez porté ils aient porté
pluperfect subjunctive*, <i>I had worn</i>	j'eusse porté tu eusses porté il eût porté	nous eussions porté vous eussiez porté ils eussent porté

Imperative of -er verbs

The **tu** form of the imperative of **-er** verbs (also verbs like **ouvrir**, see p. 29) has no **-s** except when followed by **y** or **en**:

donne-le-moi, give it to me!

donnes-en à ta sœur aussi, give your sister some
as well!

vas-y, go on!

* archaic or literary

Spelling changes in some -er verbs

► Tenses with changes are given in detail in the verb tables on p. 239.

■ Verbs ending **-e[CONSONANT]er** change the **e** of the stem to **è** when a silent **e** follows:

mener → **je mène**

They also make this change in the future and conditional, where the **e** that follows is soft rather than silent:

je mènerai; je mènerais

■ verbs ending **-eter** and **-eler**, however, usually produce the open sound in the **e** by doubling the consonant:

jeter → **je jette**

rappeler → **je rappelle**

■ some verbs ending **-eter** and **-eler** follow the pattern of **mener**, changing the **e** to **è**:

acheter → **j'achète**

geler → **je gèle**

Most verbs that do this are, however, quite uncommon. The only ones you are at all likely to encounter are:

acheter, *buy*

ciseler, *engrave*

congeler, *(deep) freeze*

crocheter, *hook (up)*

déceler, *disclose*

dégeler, *thaw*

démanteler, *dismantle*

geler, *freeze*

haïter, *pant*

modeler, *model*

peler, *peel*

racheter, *buy back,
buy again*

■ Verbs ending **-é[CONSONANT]er** change the **é** to **è** before a silent **e** in the same way, *except in the future and conditional tenses*:

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espérer → **j'espère**, but
j'espéreral; **j'espérerals**

■ Verbs ending **-cer** and **-ger** change the **c** to **ç** and the **g** to **ge** before **a** and **o**. This keeps the **c** and the **g** soft:

commencer → **nous commençons**
manger → **nous mangeons**

■ Verbs ending **-oyer** and **-uyer** change the **y** to **i** before a silent **e**:

envoyer → **j'envoie**
appuyer → **j'appuie**

With verbs ending **-ayer** this change is optional:

payer → **je paie** or **je paye**

CONJUGATION OF -ir VERBS

(Second-conjugation verbs)

In all tenses **elle** (*she*), **on** (*one*), and singular nouns are followed by the **il** form of the verb; **elles** (*they*, feminine) and plural nouns are followed by the **ils** form of the verb.

infinitive	finir , to finish
present participle	finissant , finishing
past participle	fini , finished
imperative	finis , finish ...! finissons , let's finish ... finissez , finish ...!

Simple tenses

present tense,	je finis	nous finissons
<i>I finish, I am</i>	tu finis	vous finissez
<i>finishing</i>	il finit	ils finissent

imperfect tense, <i>I finished, I was finishing, I used to finish</i>	je finissais tu finissais il finissait	nous finissions vous finissiez ils finissaient
past historic tense, <i>I finished</i>	je finis tu finis il finit	nous finîmes vous finîtes ils finirent
future tense, <i>I shall finish, I shall be finishing</i>	je finirai tu finiras il finira	nous finirons vous finirez ils finiront
conditional tense, <i>I should finish</i>	je finirais tu finirais il finirait	nous finirions vous finiriez ils finiraient
present subjunctive, <i>I finish, I may finish</i>	je finisse tu finisses il finisse	nous finissions vous finissiez ils finissent
imperfect subjunctive*, <i>I finished, I might finish</i>	je finisse tu finisses il finît	nous finissions vous finissiez ils finissent

Compound tenses

perfect tense, <i>I finished, I have finished</i>	j'ai fini tu as fini il a fini	nous avons fini vous avez fini ils ont fini
pluperfect tense, <i>I had finished</i>	j'avais fini tu avais fini il avait fini	nous avions fini vous aviez fini ils avaient fini
future perfect tense, <i>I shall have finished</i>	j'aurai fini tu auras fini il aura fini	nous aurons fini vous aurez fini ils auront fini
conditional perfect tense, <i>I should have finished</i>	j'aurais fini tu aurais fini il aurait fini	nous aurions fini vous auriez fini ils auraient fini

* archaic or literary

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past anterior tense*,
I had finished

j'**eus** fini
tu **eus** fini
il **eut** fini

nous **eûmes** fini
vous **eûtes** fini
ils **eurent** fini

perfect subjunctive,
*I finished, I may
have finished*

j'**ale** fini
tu **ales** fini
il **ait** fini

nous **ayons** fini
vous **ayez** fini
ils **aient** fini

pluperfect
subjunctive*, *I had
finished*

j'**eusse** fini
tu **eusses** fini
il **eût** fini

nous **eussions** fini
vous **eussiez** fini
ils **eussent** fini

CONJUGATION OF -re VERBS

(Third-conjugation verbs)

In all tenses **elle** (*she*), **on** (*one*), and singular nouns are followed by the **il** form of the verb; **elles** (*they*, feminine) and plural nouns are followed by the **ils** form of the verb.

infinitive

vendre, *to sell*

present participle

vendant, *selling*

past participle

vendu, *sold*

imperative

vends, *sell ...!*

vendons, *let's sell ...*

vendez, *sell ...!*

Simple tenses

present tense,
I sell, I am selling

je vends
tu vends
il vend

nous vendons
vous vendez
ils vendent

imperfect tense,
*I sold, I was selling,
I used to sell*

je vendais
tu vendais
il vendait

nous vendions
vous vendiez
ils vendaient

* archaic or literary

past historic tense, <i>I sold</i>	je vendis tu vendis il vendit	nous vendîmes vous vendîtes ils vendirent
future tense, <i>I shall sell, I shall be selling</i>	je vendrai tu vendras il vendra	nous vendrons vous vendrez ils vendront
conditional tense, <i>I should sell</i>	je vendrais tu vendrais il vendrait	nous vendrions vous vendriez ils vendraient
present subjunctive, <i>I sell, I may sell</i>	je vende tu vendes il vende	nous vendions vous vendiez ils vendent
imperfect subjunctive*, <i>I sold, I might sell</i>	je vendisse tu vendisses il vendît	nous vendissions vous vendissiez ils vendissent

Compound tenses

perfect tense, <i>I sold, I have sold, I have been selling</i>	j'ai vendu tu as vendu il a vendu	nous avons vendu vous avez vendu ils ont vendu
pluperfect tense, <i>I had sold, I had been selling</i>	j'avais vendu tu avais vendu il avait vendu	nous avions vendu vous aviez vendu ils avaient vendu
future perfect tense, <i>I shall have sold</i>	j'aurai vendu tu auras vendu il aura vendu	nous aurons vendu vous aurez vendu ils auront vendu
conditional perfect tense, <i>I should have sold</i>	j'aurais vendu tu aurais vendu il aurait vendu	nous aurions vendu vous auriez vendu ils auraient vendu
past anterior tense*, <i>I had sold</i>	j'eus vendu tu eus vendu il eut vendu	nous eûmes vendu vous eûtes vendu ils eurent vendu

* archaic or literary

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perfect subjunctive,
*I sold, I may have
sold*

pluperfect
subjunctive*,
I had sold

j'**ai** vendu
tu **as** vendu
il **a**t vendu

j'**eusse** vendu
tu **eusses** vendu
il **eût** vendu

nous **ayons** vendu
vous **ayez** vendu
ils **aient** vendu

nous **eussions** vendu
vous **eussiez** vendu
ils **eussent** vendu

COMPOUND TENSES

► For the formation of the compound tenses see p. 3.

Compound tenses formed with être

Although most verbs form their compound tenses with **avoir** as the auxiliary, two groups form these tenses with **être**: reflexive verbs and a small number of common verbs expressing motion or change of state.

■ Reflexive verbs

Je me suis levé de bonne heure, I got up early
tu t'étais couché tard?, you'd gone to bed late?

► See p. 30 for the formation of reflexive verbs and p. 15 for their agreement.

■ 'Motion' verbs

This is a group of thirteen common (and a few more quite uncommon) verbs mainly expressing some kind of motion or change of state, and all intransitive (used without a direct object):

arriver, arrive
partir, set off
entrer, enter
sortir, go out
aller, go
venir, come

Il est arrivé
Il est parti
Il est entré
Il est sorti
Il est allé
Il est venu

* archaic or literary

monter, go up	Il est monté
descendre, go down	Il est descendu
mourir, die	Il est mort
naître, be born	Il est né
rester, stay	Il est resté
tomber, fall	Il est tombé
retourner, return	Il est retourné

Accourir and **passer** used intransitively may take either **être** or **avoir**:

elle est accourue/elle a accouru, she ran up

Except **convenir à (suit)**, all compound verbs based on the above verbs also take **être** when used intransitively.

je suis parvenu à le faire, I managed to do it

il est devenu soldat, he became a soldier

but

cela ne lui a pas convenu, it didn't suit him

► See p. 15 for the past-participle agreement with this group of verbs.

■ 'Motion' verbs used transitively

Some of the above verbs can also be used with a direct object (transitively). These verbs are:

descendre, to take down, to get down, to go down

monter, to take up, to put up, to bring up, to go up

entrer (or more usually its compound, rentrer), to

put in, to let in, to bring in

retourner, to turn (over)

sortir, to take out, to bring out

When they are used this way they take **avoir**, not **être**:

il a sorti un billet de cent francs de son

portefeuille, he took a hundred-franc note from his wallet

j'ai descendu l'escalier, I came down the stairs