The Present Tense - Indicatif Présent

The present tense in French - known as "le présent de l'indicatif" - is one of the most fundamental tenses. It is used to describe (1) actions that are currently happening, (2) habitual actions, (3) general truths, and (4) near future events.

When we say "présent" in French we mean "le présent de l'indicatif" - but we just say "le présent", or "au présent" ("in the present tense"). In French, verb tenses are categorized into different "families" of tenses called *modes* - "indicatif" is the largest of these. For a breakdown of the different *modes*, see *Intro to Verb French Tenses*.

Formation of the Present Tense

Regular VS Irregular Verbs

In French, like in English, there are regular verbs and irregular verbs. Apart from a few spelling exceptions, regular verbs follow a single pattern of conjugation for any given verb tense. The regular verbs in French are *all the verbs that end in -ER, except "aller"*.

First Group Verbs (-er verbs)
Example: PARLER (to speak)

je parl**e**
tu parl**es**
il/elle/on parl**e**
nous parl**ons**
vous parl**ez**
ils/elles parl**ent**

To conjugate a regular verb, all you need to do is remove "-er" and replace it with the correct pattern of conjugation for the verb tense.

All regular verbs in the Present tense follow the pattern of conjugation on the left - but there are some **spelling exceptions** for certain verbs.

When you remove the ending of a verb, you're left with the **stem** (also called "root" or "radical"). Outside of some exceptions, regular verbs usually keep the same root for all conjugations across all tenses. For any given verb tense, regular verbs have the same pattern of endings.

Irregular verbs (-oir, -re, -ir) are irregular because they don't follow the same rules: the **root** of an irregular verb can change drastically when conjugated, and a given ending in the infinitive (-oir, -re, -ir) does *not* necessarily follow a single pattern of conjugation across all verbs in the present tense.

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The following are patterns of conjugation that appear across several **irregular** verbs in the present tense:

-x, -x, -t, -ons, -ez, -ent
-s, -s, -t, -ons, -ez, -ent
-ds, -ds, -d, -ons, -ez, -ent
-s, -s, [blank], -ons, -ez, -ent

…but there are no rules that hold across all irregular verbs of a given ending. There are **three** characteristics to keep in mind for irregular verbs:

- removing the ending doesn't necessarily produce the stem used in conjugation
- the stem is subject to change throughout the conjugation
- two irregular verbs with the same ending in the infinitive can have two different patterns of conjugation

When learning irregular verbs, you might notice *some* patterns (e.g. *most* verbs in -re follow one pattern of conjugation, *half* the verbs ending in -ir follow one pattern of conjugation, etc.), but the stems of irregular verbs are subject to change in unpredictable ways across verbs.

[**EXAMPLE 1**] *Most* verbs that end in **-re** follow one pattern of conjugation in the present:

-s, -s, [blank], -ons, -ez, -ent

Vendre (to sell): remove -re to get the stem "vend-", and add the ending…

je vend**s**, tu vend**s**, il/elle/on vend, nous vend**ons**, vous vend**ez**, ils vend**ent**

But then, for some verbs that end in -re, removing -re in the infinitive doesn't produce the stem used in conjugation, and/or the stem changes throughout the conjugation.

For example:

- the stem of the verb "mettre" (to put) is "mett-" in the plural (nous, vous, ils/elles) but "met-" in the singular (je, tu, il/elle/on)
- the stem of the verb "prendre" (to take) is "prend-" in the singular (je, tu, il/elle/on), but "pren-" for *nous* and *vous*, and "prenn-" for *ils/elles/ont*

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[**EXAMPLE 2]** “Voir” (to see) in the present has the pattern: -s, -s, -t, -ons, -ez, -ent…

je voi**s**, tu voi**s**, il/elle/on voi**t**, nous voy**ons**, vous voy**ez**, ils voi**ent**

…but 1. unlike a regular verb, you don’t get the root of the infinitive verb by dropping the ending (if you dropped “-oir”, you’d be left with “v-”, but the stems used in the present are: voi-, voi, voi-, voy-, voy-, voi-), and 2. the stem changes for *nous* and *vous*.

There are also “sub-groups” of irregular verbs that have the same ending when conjugated ***and*** whose stem changes in a similar way. Some these “sub-groups” are:

- Partir, sortir, dormir, mentir, sentir, servir
- Verbs ending in *tenir* or *venir*: venir, devenir, revenir, parvenir, intervenir, se souvenir; tenir, maintenir, obtenir, retenir, appartenir, soutenir
- Verbs ending in *-aindre, -oindre, -eindre*: craindre, plaindre, joindre, peindre, atteindre, éteindre
- Verbs ending in *-uire*: conduire, produire, traduire, construire, détruire, cuire, nuire
- Verbs ending in *prendre*: prendre, comprendre, apprendre, reprendre…
- Verbs ending in *mettre*: mettre, permettre, promettre, remettre, soumettre…

[EXAMPLE 3] *Pouvoir* (can / to be able to) has the same conjugation pattern as *vouloir* (to want) and the stem of each verb changes in a similar way.

Pouvoir - Présent	*Vouloir* - Présent
je peu**x**	je veu**x**
tu peu**x**	tu veu**x**
il/elle/on peu**t**	il/elle/on veu**t**
nous pouv**ons**	nous voul**ons**
vous pouv**ez**	vous voul**ez**
ils/elles peuv**ent**	ils/elles veul**ent**

There are no rules to determine the conjugation of an irregular verb just by looking at its infinitive form. By contrast, a regular verb (-er) will have both a regular root (remove *-er* from the infinitive, except for some spelling exceptions) and a regular ending; we know its conjugation just by looking at the infinitive. Learning the conjugation of irregular verbs is simply a matter of memorization. Focus on learning the most common verbs first.

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The following **four** verbs are so irregular that they don't share a clear pattern with other irregular verbs:

1. **ÊTRE** (to be)
   - je suis
   - tu es
   - il/elle/on est
   - nous sommes
   - vous êtes
   - ils/elles sont

2. **AVOIR** (to have)
   - j'ai
   - tu as
   - il/elle/on a
   - nous avons
   - vous avez
   - ils/elles ont

3. **ALLER** (to go)
   - je vais
   - tu vas
   - il/elle/on va
   - nous allons
   - vous allez
   - ils/elles vont

4. **FAIRE*** (to do/make)
   - je fais
   - tu fais
   - il/elle/on fait
   - nous faisons
   - vous faites
   - ils/elles font

*verbs that end in "faire" (défaire, refaire, satisfaire…) are conjugated the same

Usage of the Present Tense

1. Describing **general truths**, **permanent states**, or **regular** or **habitual actions**.
   - **Il va** au travail tous les jours. (He goes to work every day.)
   - **Il pleut** beaucoup à Vancouver. (It rains a lot in Vancouver.)
   - **Je vais** beaucoup au gym ces jours-ci. (I go to the gym a lot these days.)
   - **L'eau bout** à 100 degrés. (Water boils at 100 degrees.)
   - **Le soleil se lève** à l'est. (The sun rises in the east.)

2. Describing **actions currently taking place**.
   - **Je mange** une pomme. (I am eating an apple.)
   - **Je pars** pour le travail. (I am leaving for work.)

3. Describing actions that will happen in the **near future**.
   - **Je pars** demain. (**I am leaving** tomorrow.)
   - **Je vois** mon ami cette fin de semaine. (**I am seeing** my friend this weekend.)

4. What **started in the past** and is **still true** (see below).
   - **Je joue** du piano depuis 5 ans. (I have been playing piano for 5 years.)
   - **J'habite** à Montréal depuis 2024. (I have been living in Montreal since 2024.)

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Equivalencies in English

The present tense in French corresponds to several English tenses depending on context. Unlike English, which uses distinct verb forms to express these nuances, French uses a single present tense form for all of them.

1. **Simple Present** Used for habits, general truths, and states.
    - *Il parle anglais.* (He speaks English.)

2. **Present Continuous** Used for actions happening right now or around now.
    - *Je lis un livre.* (I am reading a book.)

3. **Present Perfect Continuous** Used for actions that began in the past and are still ongoing, typically with *depuis* (since/for).
    - *Elle attend depuis une heure.* (She has been waiting for an hour.)

To express what you would with the **Present Perfect Continuous** in English, you need to use a context clue that expresses a timeframe in French. “Depuis” is most clearly indicates that the action started in the past and is ongoing in the present (which is the function of the Present Perfect Continuous), but expressions in the present that use terms like “ces jours-ci” (these days), “dernièrement” (lately) can also be translated to the Present Perfect Continuous in English.

Je regarde beaucoup de films dernièrement.

I’ve been watching a lot of movies lately.

Je lis beaucoup ces jours-ci.

I have been reading a lot these days.

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