



Le Français Réel

The French nobody taught you in school — a reactivation manual for someone who already knows more than he thinks.

You spent six years on Palestine Street learning sixteen tenses. You can recognise a *passé simple*. You know that *futur antérieur* exists and roughly what it means. You could probably still conjugate *être* in the subjunctive if someone put a gun to your head.

None of that is the problem. The problem is that a French person has never once said « *Nous allâmes au marché* » to another French person. They said « *On est allés au marché* » — and school never mentioned it.

This book is not a course. It is a **key**. Everything in here is already somewhere in your head. The job is to sort it into three piles: **use this, recognise this, forget this** — and then hand you the spoken layer that was withheld.

AVANT DE COMMENCER How to read this

Read chapters 1 and 4 first. If you read nothing else, read chapter 4 — it is the entire point of the book.

Three labels run through every page. They are the spine of the method:

LABEL	WHAT IT MEANS
PARLE	Speak this. Active. It should come out of your mouth without thinking. Drill it until it's reflex.
COMPREND	Recognise this. Passive. You need to understand it when it hits your ear or your eye — but you never need to produce it.
OUBLIE	Let it go. Real French, but you will not use it and nobody expects you to. School spent months here. You may spend zero.

And two colours, everywhere:

LE FRANÇAIS SCOLAIRE <i>What Palestine Street taught you. Correct. Written. Sometimes beautiful. Frequently unspeakable.</i>	→	LE FRANÇAIS PARLÉ <i>What comes out of an actual mouth in an actual café. This is the column you are here for.</i>
--	---	--

Neither column is wrong. That is the single most important idea in this book. School French isn't a lie — it's a *register*. It's the French of the newspaper, the contract, the exam, the formal email, the novel. You will need it. But it is one of several registers, and school taught it to you as if it were the only one, which is why you can read Camus and freeze at a bakery.

THE ONE-LINE THESIS

You do not need to learn French. You need to **demote about 40% of what you know** from active to passive, and **bolt on the spoken layer** that sits on top of it. That is a matter of weeks, not years.

The chapters

01	The inheritance	what six years actually gave you
02	The ear and the mouth	sound, and the specific traps for an Arabic ear
03	The tense map	all 16, sorted: speak / know / forget
04	The spoken layer	★ the chapter school withheld
05	Pronouns, and the two school skipped	y, en, and the stacking order
06	Saying no	negation beyond ne...pas
07	Asking	three registers of question
08	The verb core	the ~40 verbs that carry the language
09	The word core	frequency vocabulary, by situation
10	Glue	du coup, en fait, quoi, genre, bref
11	Scripts	café, taxi, doctor, phone, flat, argument, flirt
12	La langue de ta grand-mère	the Algerian layer — your unfair advantage
13	False friends	the words that will embarrass you
14	Numbers, time, money	and why 97 is a maths problem
15	Reflexes	fixed expressions fired without thinking
16	Thirty days	the reactivation plan

CHAPITRE 01 The inheritance

An honest accounting of what six years of formal French gave you — and what it quietly withheld.

What you have (and don't credit yourself for)

A person who studied French formally for six years and then stopped is not a beginner. They are something stranger and much luckier: a person with a **complete skeleton and no muscle**. Specifically, you almost certainly still own the following, whether or not you can feel it:

YOU OWN THIS	WHY IT MATTERS MORE THAN YOU THINK
Grammatical gender	The single hardest thing for an adult learner, and you absorbed it as a child. You already "feel" that it's <i>la table</i> and <i>le livre</i> . Adults starting at 30 fight this for years.
Verb morphology	You know that verbs change shape by person. Arabic does this too, so your brain never resisted it. English speakers find this genuinely alien.
The agreement instinct	Adjectives following nouns in gender and number — again, Arabic primed you. <i>Une grande maison blanche</i> . You don't have to think.
A passive vocabulary	Probably 1,500–3,000 words sitting dormant. Not retrievable on demand, but <i>recognisable</i> — and recognition is 80% of the way back.
Orthographic decoding	You can look at « <i>oiseaux</i> » and produce roughly the right noise. That's a non-trivial skill and it never fully leaves.
The tense architecture	You know French slices time finely and you know roughly where the slices are. You need re-sorting, not rebuilding.

READ THIS TWICE

Dormant is not gone. Language decay is overwhelmingly a **retrieval** problem, not a **storage** problem. The words are on the disk; the index is stale. Everything in this book is designed to rebuild the index — which is why it drills recall and swaps rather than teaching from zero.

What school withheld, and why

Nothing sinister happened. Formal language teaching optimises for what it can *examine*, and you can examine a *passé simple* conjugation table with a red pen and a marking scheme. You cannot easily examine whether a student sounds like a human being. So the syllabus drifts toward the written, the formal, and the tabulable — and the spoken language, which is messy and unmarkable, falls off the edge.

The result is a specific and very recognisable profile. Read this and see whether it stings:

- You can **read** far above your ability to **speak**.
- You **understand written French** far better than **spoken French** — a native at full speed sounds like one long word.
- When you do speak, you sound **oddly formal** — like a nineteenth-century letter walked into a bar.
- You know tenses that natives never say, and you're missing constructions natives say *every sentence*.
- You freeze on trivial transactions — bakery, taxi — while being able to parse a newspaper editorial.

That profile is not a failure. It's the exact, predictable output of the method. And it is **far easier to fix than the reverse problem**. A person who can chat but can't read has to build an entire formal system from scratch. You

have the system. You need the street.

The four withheld things

Reduced to essentials, school withheld exactly four things. This book is those four things, elaborated.

	WITHHELD	THE CONSEQUENCE
1	Register — that French has several, and school taught one	You deploy formal French in casual settings and sound like a robot or a snob. Natives find it charming for four seconds and exhausting after ten.
2	Reduction — that spoken French deletes enormous amounts of what's written	You can't hear. <i>Je ne sais pas</i> is written; [ʒepa] is heard. If you're listening for the written form, you will never catch the spoken one.
3	Frequency — which of the things you learned are actually common	You spent equal effort on <i>passé simple</i> (near-zero spoken frequency) and <i>passé composé</i> (carries the entire past). Effort was allocated by syllabus, not by reality.
4	Glue — the fillers, hedges and discourse markers that make speech sound human	Your French has no <i>du coup</i> , no <i>en fait</i> , no <i>bref</i> , no <i>quoi</i> . Grammatically flawless, texturally dead.

YOUR FIFTH ASSET — AND IT ISN'T SMALL

An Algerian grandmother. This matters more than sentiment. It means French was **ambient** in your childhood — a living noise attached to a real person, not a subject with a grade attached. Words you absorbed that way are stored differently and more durably than words you revised for an exam. Chapter 12 is dedicated to mining that seam, because it is the cheapest vocabulary you will ever recover: you are not learning it, you are *remembering* it.

What this book will and won't do

IT WILL	IT WON'T
Re-sort your tenses by real-world frequency	Re-teach you what a verb is
Hand you the spoken layer, explicitly	Pretend school French was worthless
Rebuild recall through swaps and drills	Give you 5,000 flashcards
Fix your ear for reduced speech	Replace actually listening to French
Mine your Maghrebi inheritance	Teach you Darija (a different job)

CHAPITRE 02 The ear and the mouth

Sound first, because it gates everything. You cannot recall a word you cannot hear, and you cannot be understood saying a word you cannot shape.

School taught you to read French aloud. It did not teach you to *hear* French — those are different skills, and the second is the one that fails you in a real conversation. Below, the sounds that actually cause trouble, with specific attention to where an Arabic-speaking mouth goes wrong.

The four sounds that will expose you

1 · THE U / OU SPLIT [Y] VS [U]

The most important sound in this chapter. Arabic has **و** — the [u] of *ou*. It does **not** have [y], the sound of French *u*. Untrained, your mouth will collapse both into [u], and you will spend your life saying the wrong word.

YOU MEAN	YOU'LL ACTUALLY SAY	THE DAMAGE
<i>tu</i> [ty] — you	<i>tout</i> [tu] — all	Mild confusion, constant
<i>rue</i> [ʁy] — street	<i>roue</i> [ʁu] — wheel	Wrong noun, every address
<i>dessus</i> — on top	<i>dessous</i> — underneath	Exact opposite meaning
<i>bu</i> — drunk (past part.)	<i>boue</i> — mud	Comic
<i>pull</i> — sweater	<i>poule</i> — hen	Comic, in a shop

THE FIX — MECHANICAL, WORKS IN A DAY

Say « ee » as in *see*. Hold it. Your tongue is high and forward — **leave it exactly there, don't move it a millimetre**. Now round your lips as if to whistle. The tongue stays; only the lips change. That noise is [y].

The whole trick: [y] is [i]'s tongue with [u]'s lips. If your tongue slides back, you've produced [u] and you're saying *hen* instead of *sweater*. Drill the pair aloud: *tu-tout*, *rue-roue*, *su-sous*, *vu-vous*, *pu-pou*, *bu-boue*. Do it in a mirror. When lips move and tongue doesn't, you've got it.

2 · NASAL VOWELS

Air through the nose, and — critically — **the consonant is not pronounced**. The *n* in *vin* is not a sound; it's an instruction to nasalise the vowel before it. School taught you to read these. Reading them is not the issue. The issue is that Arabic has no phonemic nasal vowels, so your ear doesn't reliably separate them.

WRITTEN	SOUND	WORD	NOTE
<i>in, ain, ein, im</i>	[ɛ̃]	<i>vin, pain, plein, simple</i>	Most common. Mouth wide-ish.
<i>an, en, am, em</i>	[ɑ̃]	<i>grand, temps, chambre</i>	Mouth open, back.
<i>on, om</i>	[ɔ̃]	<i>bon, nom, tomber</i>	Lips rounded.
<i>un, um</i>	[œ̃]	<i>un, brun, parfum</i>	Dying — most of France now merges it into [ɛ̃]. Don't sweat it.

The triplet that must become automatic: **vin** [vɛ̃] / **vent** [vɑ̃] / **vont** [vɔ̃]. Wine, wind, they-go. Same consonant, three different mouths. Drill until they're three distinct objects in your ear, not one blur.

TRAP

Nasalisation **dies when a vowel follows**. *bon* [bɔ̃] is nasal — but *bonne* [bɔn] is not: the *n* now has its own vowel to lean on, so it becomes a real consonant and the vowel de-nasalises. Same for *un* [œ̃] → *une* [yn]. This is why the feminine so often sounds like a completely different word.

3 · THE FRENCH R [ʁ]

Here you have an advantage and a trap in the same box. The French *r* is uvular — produced at the very back, near where Arabic makes غ (ghayn). It is **not** the Arabic ر (the tapped/trilled front *r*), and it is not the English *r*.

THE SHORTCUT YOU ALREADY OWN

If you can say غراب — if غ is in your mouth at all — you can already make a French *r*. It is essentially a lighter, breathier غ. Say غ, then soften it until it's barely a scrape. That's *Paris, merci, rouge*.

The trap: your instinct under stress will be to reach for ر, because it's the letter that *looks* like *r*. Rolling your *rs* in French is instantly and unmistakably foreign. When you're tired, this is the first thing to slip.

4 · E, AND THE SILENT APOCALYPSE

French writes far more than it says. Roughly: **final consonants are silent** unless they're in *c-r-f-l* (mnemonic: *CaReFuL*), and **final e is silent**, and **plural s is silent**.

The consequence is the thing school never says out loud: **the entire present tense of a regular verb is one single sound**.

WRITTEN	SAID	RULING
<i>je parle</i>	[paʁl]	Four different spellings. One identical noise . The <i>-e</i> , <i>-es</i> , <i>-e</i> , <i>-ent</i> endings are all silent. Only the pronoun tells you who's speaking — which is why French can never drop its pronouns and Arabic can.
<i>tu parles</i>	[paʁl]	
<i>il parle</i>	[paʁl]	
<i>ils parlent</i>	[paʁl]	
<i>nous parlons</i>	[paʁlɔ̃]	Audible — but see ch. 4: you won't be saying this.
<i>vous parlez</i>	[paʁle]	Audible.

Sit with that. Of the six persons of a regular *-er* verb, **four are homophones**. All those hours of conjugation drills were, phonetically, drills of a single sound. That's not a criticism of the drills — you need the spellings to write. But it explains why spoken French feels so much slipperier than the tables suggested.

Liaison, briefly

A silent final consonant wakes up when the next word starts with a vowel. *les amis* → [lezami]. *un petit enfant* → [œ̃ptitɑ̃fɑ̃]. This is why French sounds like one continuous ribbon rather than separate words — **word boundaries are not audible**. Your ear is hunting for gaps that do not exist.

STATUS	WHEN	EXAMPLE
Obligatory	Determiner + noun; pronoun + verb; after <i>est</i>	<i>les_amis, nous_avons, ils_ont, c'est_ici</i>
Optional	After plural nouns, after <i>mais, très</i> — more of it = more formal	<i>très_intéressant</i>

STATUS	WHEN	EXAMPLE
Forbidden	After <i>et</i> ; before aspirated <i>h</i> ; after a singular noun	<i>et</i> <i>il</i> — never [etil]. <i>les</i> <i>héros</i> .

DON'T OVER-ENGINEER THIS

Liaison has a long tail of rules that native children take a decade to fully absorb, and adult natives argue about. **Do the obligatory ones, skip the optional ones, and you will sound normal.** Over-liaising is a classic marker of someone who learned from a book — it reads as pompous. Under-liaising in casual speech reads as nothing at all.

The rhythm difference

English and Arabic are **stress-timed** — some syllables get punched, others get crushed. French is **syllable-timed**: every syllable gets roughly equal weight, and the only real stress lands gently on the *last syllable of a phrase group*, not the word.

This is why French sounds "flat" or "even" to you, and why your French sounds "bumpy" to them. You are importing a stress pattern that doesn't exist. *un restaurant* is not *RES-tau-rant*; it's *un-res-tau-RANT* — four beats, near-equal, the last one slightly longer.

DRILL

Take any sentence and tap one finger per syllable, evenly, like a metronome. « *Je vou-drais un ca-fé s'il vous plaît* » — nine even taps, last one held. If your taps are uneven, you're speaking English with French words.

CHAPITRE 03 The tense map

All sixteen, sorted honestly. This chapter is where you get most of your six years back — by being told which two-thirds of it you may stop carrying.

Here is the table school owed you and never printed. Every tense you learned, with a blunt verdict and a real frequency estimate for *spoken* French.

TENSE	VERDICT	SPOKEN FREQ.	THE TRUTH
Présent <i>je parle</i>	PARLE	Enormous	Carries present, near-future, habitual, and historical past. Does more work than any other tense. Also: <i>je fais ça demain</i> — present for future.
Passé composé <i>j'ai parlé</i>	PARLE	Enormous	The past tense. Singular. It absorbed the entire job of <i>passé simple</i> in speech. If you master one past tense, this is it.
Imparfait <i>je parlais</i>	PARLE	Very high	Background, description, habit, "was ~ing". Pairs with <i>passé composé</i> constantly — see the split below.
Futur proche <i>je vais parler</i>	PARLE	Very high	School treated it as a footnote. In speech it beats futur simple roughly 3:1 . This is how the future is actually expressed.
Impératif <i>parle !</i>	PARLE	High	Commands. Easy — it's the present minus the pronoun.
Conditionnel présent <i>je parlerais</i>	PARLE	High	Not really "the conditional" in daily life — it's the politeness tense . <i>Je voudrais, tu pourrais, ce serait possible</i> . You need it hourly.
Futur simple <i>je parlerai</i>	PARLE	Moderate	Alive, but narrower than school implied: distant future, formal register, promises, weather forecasts, <i>quand</i> -clauses. Not the default.
Subjonctif présent <i>que je parle</i>	PARLE	Moderate	Terrifying at school, trivial in practice — because ~90% of real uses are after about six triggers . Learn the triggers, not the theory. See below.
Plus-que-parfait <i>j'avais parlé</i>	COMPRENDS	Low-moderate	"Had done". Genuinely used, but you can dodge it with chronological ordering. Recognise it instantly; produce it when you're comfortable.
Conditionnel passé <i>j'aurais parlé</i>	COMPRENDS	Low	Regret and reproach: <i>j'aurais dû</i> (I should have), <i>tu aurais pu</i> (you could have). Worth having those two frozen phrases actively; the rest passive.
Futur antérieur <i>j'aurai parlé</i>	COMPRENDS	Low	"Will have done". Rare. Also used for speculation: <i>il aura oublié</i> — "he must have forgotten". That second use is the more common one.
Passé récent <i>je viens de parler</i>	PARLE	Moderate	"Just did". Often skipped at school. Extremely handy and dead simple: <i>venir de</i> + infinitive.
Passé simple <i>je parlai</i>	OUBLIE	Zero	Never spoken. Not "rare" — <i>zero</i> . Literature and history books only. Recognise 3rd-person forms for reading. Never produce it. Ever.
Passé antérieur <i>j'eus parlé</i>	OUBLIE	Zero	Even dead. Literary only, and even there it's receding. Most educated natives couldn't form it on demand.
Subjonctif imparfait <i>que je parlasse</i>	OUBLIE	Zero	Comically dead. Using it today is a <i>joke</i> — natives deploy it to be deliberately absurd. It sounds like Molière ordering a kebab.

TENSE	VERDICT	SPOKEN FREQ.	THE TRUTH
Subjonctif plus-que-parfait <i>que j'eusse parlé</i>	OUBLIE	Zero	A museum exhibit. Genuinely: forget this exists.

THE RECKONING

Four of the sixteen tenses you were drilled on have a spoken frequency of **exactly zero**. Not low — zero. A French person could live eighty years and never once say a *subjonctif imparfait* aloud in earnest.

Meanwhile *futur proche* — *je vais faire*, four words of grammar, learnable in a minute — carries most of the actual future and was taught to you as an afterthought.

That's the misallocation in one paragraph. Not your fault. But now it's visible, and now you can fix it.

Passé composé vs imparfait — the only past distinction that matters

This trips up every learner, and school's explanation ("completed vs ongoing") is true but useless in the moment. Here's the version that works at conversational speed:

IMPARFAIT — THE CAMERA <i>The scene. What was already happening. Weather, mood, age, description, habits, repeated actions.</i> Answers: what was it like? what used to happen?	vs	PASSÉ COMPOSÉ — THE EVENT <i>The thing that happened. A single, bounded action that moves the story forward.</i> Answers: what happened next?
--	----	--

The test that never fails: **if it could be interrupted, it's imparfait. If it's the interruption, it's passé composé.**

Je dormais quand le téléphone a sonné. — I was sleeping (scene, interruptible) when the phone rang (event, the interruption).

Il faisait beau, alors on est sortis. — Weather = scene. Going out = event.

Quand j'étais petit, j'allais chez ma grand-mère chaque été. — All scene, all habit. No events at all.

SAME VERB, BOTH TENSES, DIFFERENT MEANING

This pair proves the distinction is real and not decorative:

Je connaissais Marie. — I knew Marie (*state, ongoing*).

J'ai connu Marie en 2019. — I met Marie in 2019 (*the bounded event of coming to know*).

Also: *je savais* = I knew / *j'ai su* = I found out. *je voulais* = I wanted / *j'ai voulu* = I decided to try. *je pouvais* = I was able / *j'ai pu* = I managed to.

The subjunctive, defused

School made this a monster. It isn't. Here's the whole thing:

Form: take the *ils* form of the present, drop *-ent*, add *-e, -es, -e, -ions, -iez, -ent*. *ils parlent* → *que je parle*. For most verbs the subjunctive is *identical in sound* to the present anyway — so half the time nobody can even hear whether you did it.

Irregulars you actually need — there are six, and that's the lot:

être *que je sois, que tu sois, qu'il soit, que nous soyons, qu'ils soient*

<i>avoir</i>	<i>que j'aie, que tu aies, qu'il ait, que nous ayons, qu'ils aient</i>
<i>aller</i>	<i>que j'aille, qu'il aille, que nous allions, qu'ils aillent</i>
<i>faire</i>	<i>que je fasse, qu'il fasse, que nous fassions, qu'ils fassent</i>
<i>pouvoir</i>	<i>que je puisse, qu'il puisse, que nous puissions</i>
<i>savoir</i>	<i>que je sache, qu'il sache, que nous sachions</i>

Triggers: forget the grammar. Learn these as fixed openers. If a sentence starts with one of these, a subjunctive follows. That's the entire rule:

OPENER	EXAMPLE
<i>il faut que — must</i>	<i>Il faut que j'y aille. — I've got to go. (By far the most common subjunctive in daily speech.)</i>
<i>je veux que — I want</i>	<i>Je veux que tu viennes.</i>
<i>bien que — although</i>	<i>Bien qu'il soit tard...</i>
<i>pour que — so that</i>	<i>Pour que tu comprendes...</i>
<i>avant que — before</i>	<i>Avant qu'il parte...</i>
<i>je ne pense pas que</i>	<i>Je ne pense pas que ce soit vrai. (Negated opinion triggers it; positive doesn't.)</i>

THE CHEAT THAT WORKS FOREVER

Il faut que j'y aille — "I've got to go." Learn it as one frozen block, like a single word. It's the most-used subjunctive in the language, it ends conversations gracefully, and it makes you sound completely native. You now "have" the subjunctive.

CHAPITRE 04 ★ The spoken layer

The chapter school withheld. Ten rules. Between them they account for most of the distance between what you write and what a French person actually says.

Everything here is **correct French**. None of it is slang or sloppiness. It is what educated native adults say to each other, all day, in offices and living rooms — and it is systematically absent from the syllabus because it can't be marked with a red pen.

Règle 1 — *Nous* is dead. Long live *on*.

SCHOOL		REAL
<i>Nous allons au cinéma.</i>	→	<i>On va au ciné.</i>
<i>Nous sommes arrivés.</i>		<i>On est arrivés.</i>
<i>Qu'est-ce que nous faisons ?</i>		<i>On fait quoi ?</i>
Six years of nous-conjugations.		This is how "we" is said. Essentially always.

On takes **third-person singular** conjugation (*on va*, like *il va*) but means "we". The past participle still agrees with the real-world plural: *on est allés*, *on est contents*.

Why this is the highest-leverage rule in the book: it deletes an entire conjugation from your active load. Every *nous* form you ever drilled — *-ons*, *-ions*, all of it — becomes passive. You now conjugate five persons, not six, and one of them (*on*) you already knew as *il*.

WHEN NOUS SURVIVES

Formal writing. Speeches. Job interviews. *Nous* as a stressed pronoun at the start of a sentence — « *Nous, on fait comme ça* » ("Us, we do it like this") — which is itself a very common spoken structure that uses *both*. And in the imperative: *allons-y*. Keep it passive; deploy consciously.

Règle 2 — *Ne* falls off

School: negation is *ne ... pas*, two parts, both obligatory. Reality: in speech, **the *ne* is simply gone**. Not sometimes. Overwhelmingly.

WRITTEN / FORMAL	SPOKEN
<i>Je ne sais pas.</i>	<i>Je sais pas.</i> → often <i>Chais pas.</i> [ʃepa]
<i>Je n'ai pas le temps.</i>	<i>J'ai pas le temps.</i>
<i>Ce n'est pas grave.</i>	<i>C'est pas grave.</i>
<i>Il n'y a personne.</i>	<i>Y'a personne.</i>
<i>Ne t'inquiète pas.</i>	<i>T'inquiète.</i> (even the <i>pas</i> goes)

THIS IS THE #1 LISTENING BLOCKER

If your ear is waiting for *ne* to signal "negation incoming", you will **hear the opposite of what was said**. The negation now lives entirely in *pas*, which arrives *after* the verb. Retrain: *pas* is the signal. Not *ne*.

Règle 3 — Inversion is for books

You were taught « *Vas-tu au marché ?* ». Nobody says this. Chapter 7 covers the full picture, but the headline: intonation and *est-ce que* do all the work, and question words go **at the end**.

SCHOOL		REAL
<i>Où vas-tu ?</i> <i>Que fais-tu ?</i> <i>Quand arrive-t-il ?</i> <i>Comment t'appelles-tu ?</i>	→	<i>Tu vas où ?</i> <i>Tu fais quoi ?</i> <i>Il arrive quand ?</i> <i>Tu t'appelles comment ?</i>

Règle 4 — The future is *aller*

Futur simple is not wrong. It's just not the default, and school made it the default.

SCHOOL		REAL
<i>Je mangerai plus tard.</i> <i>Nous partirons demain.</i> <i>Il téléphonera ce soir.</i>	→	<i>Je vais manger plus tard.</i> <i>On va partir demain.</i> <i>Il va téléphoner ce soir.</i>

And the present does future work constantly, with a time marker: « *Je pars demain.* » « *On se voit lundi.* » — I'm leaving tomorrow, we're seeing each other Monday. No future tense at all.

Règle 5 — Contraction is not laziness, it's the language

These are not "bad French". They are what fluent, educated speech *is*. Learn to **hear** all of them; use the top few yourself.

FULL	SPOKEN	SOUND	NOTE
<i>je suis</i>	<i>chuis / j'suis</i>	[ʃɥi]	Ubiquitous.
<i>je ne sais pas</i>	<i>chais pas</i>	[ʃepa]	The single most common utterance in French.
<i>tu as</i>	<i>t'as</i>	[ta]	Also <i>t'es</i> (tu es), <i>t'étais</i> .
<i>il y a</i>	<i>y'a</i>	[ja]	The <i>il</i> vanishes entirely.
<i>il n'y a pas</i>	<i>y'a pas</i>	[japa]	
<i>qu'est-ce que</i>	<i>qu'est-c' / kess</i>	[kɛs]	<i>Kess tu fais ?</i>
<i>celui-là</i>	<i>c'ui-là</i>	[sɥila]	
<i>peut-être</i>	<i>p't-être</i>	[ptɛtʁ]	
<i>maintenant</i>	<i>mainnant</i>	[mɛ̃tnɑ̃]	Middle <i>e</i> deleted.
<i>s'il te plaît</i>	<i>s'te plaît</i>	[stəplɛ]	
<i>il est</i>	<i>i'est / y'est</i>	[jɛ]	The <i>l</i> of <i>il</i> routinely drops.
<i>elle est</i>	<i>è'est</i>	[ɛ ɛ]→[ɛ]	
<i>tu es allé où ?</i>	<i>t'es allé où ?</i>		

The master pattern behind almost all of it: **the unstressed *e* (schwa) gets deleted wherever the surrounding consonants can survive it**. That single process generates most of the list above. Once you hear it as a rule rather

than a hundred exceptions, spoken French stops being a wall.

Règle 6 — Dislocation: name the topic, then talk about it

This one is invisible to learners and *constant* in speech. French speakers pull the topic out to the edge of the sentence and leave a pronoun behind to hold its place.

TEXTBOOK	WHAT'S ACTUALLY SAID
<i>Mon frère est médecin.</i>	<i>Mon frère, il est médecin.</i>
<i>Je n'aime pas ce film.</i>	<i>Ce film, je l'aime pas.</i>
<i>Tu penses quoi ?</i>	<i>Toi, tu penses quoi ?</i>
<i>La cuisine est excellente ici.</i>	<i>La cuisine ici, elle est excellente.</i>
<i>Je trouve ça bizarre.</i>	<i>Moi, je trouve ça bizarre, quoi.</i>

WHY YOU SHOULD STEAL THIS IMMEDIATELY

Two reasons. First, it's the fastest way to sound native — it's a texture marker natives clock unconsciously. Second, and more practically: **it buys you thinking time**. Saying « *Mon frère, ...* » gives you half a second to assemble the rest of the sentence, and it sounds fluent rather than hesitant. It's a stall that reads as style.

Règle 7 — Ça eats everything

School teaches *cela*. Nobody says *cela* out loud. It's *ça*, and *ça* is everywhere:

Ça va ? · *Ça marche.* (works / OK, deal) · *Ça dépend.* · *Ça m'énerve.* · *Ça craint.* (that sucks) · *Ça y est.* (there we go / it's done) · *Ça te dit ?* (fancy it?) · *Ça caille.* (it's freezing) · *C'est ça.* (exactly)

Règle 8 — Il loses its I, and tu loses its u

Already in the table above, but it earns its own rule because it's a listening trap. *Il a dit* → [ja di]. *Tu as vu ?* → *T'as vu ?*. If you're listening for crisp pronouns you'll miss the subject entirely and lose the sentence.

Règle 9 — The -re ending evaporates

quatre → [katʁ] → in fast speech [kat]. *être* → [ɛt]. *notre* → [nɔt]. *Je suis + quatre + heures* gets crushed into something you will not recognise from the page. This is normal and universal, not regional.

Règle 10 — Vocabulary has registers too

The word isn't just right or wrong; it's *placed*. Same meaning, three altitudes:

MEANING	SOUTENU (FORMAL)	COURANT (NEUTRAL)	FAMILIER (CASUAL)
car	<i>une automobile</i>	<i>une voiture</i>	<i>une caisse, une bagnole</i>
work (n.)	<i>un emploi</i>	<i>un travail</i>	<i>un boulot, un taf</i>
money	<i>des fonds</i>	<i>de l'argent</i>	<i>du fric, du blé, de la thune</i>
food / to eat	<i>se restaurer</i>	<i>manger</i>	<i>bouffer, la bouffe</i>
tired	<i>épuisé</i>	<i>fatigué</i>	<i>crevé, naze, mort</i>
man / guy	<i>un individu</i>	<i>un homme</i>	<i>un mec, un type, un gars</i>
woman	<i>une dame</i>	<i>une femme</i>	<i>une meuf, une nana</i>
afraid	<i>craindre</i>	<i>avoir peur</i>	<i>avoir les jetons, flipper</i>
to understand	<i>saisir</i>	<i>comprendre</i>	<i>piger</i>
house / home	<i>une demeure</i>	<i>une maison</i>	<i>une baraque, chez moi</i>

VERLAN — RECOGNISE, DON'T PRODUCE

Syllable-reversal slang. *l'envers* (backwards) → *verlan* — the word names itself. You'll meet: **meuf** (femme), **keuf** (flic, cop), **relou** (lourd, annoying), **chelou** (louche, shady), **ouf** (fou, crazy — *un truc de ouf*), **teuf** (fête, party), **beur** (arabe).

Understand all of it. Say almost none of it. Verlan is tightly bound to age, city and social group; a non-native deploying it wrong sounds like a politician trying to be relatable. *Meuf* and *ouf* are broadly safe. The rest: leave it in the passive pile until you have a native friend who uses it and you've earned it by osmosis.

CHAPITRE 05 Pronouns, and the two school skipped

You know *je/tu/il*. You may never have been taught *y* and *en* properly — and natives use them in nearly every other sentence.

The full inventory

SUBJECT	DIRECT OBJ.	INDIRECT OBJ.	STRESSED	REFLEXIVE
<i>je</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>moi</i>	<i>me</i>
<i>tu</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>toi</i>	<i>te</i>
<i>il / elle</i>	<i>le / la</i>	<i>lui</i>	<i>lui / elle</i>	<i>se</i>
<i>on / nous</i>	<i>nous</i>	<i>nous</i>	<i>nous</i>	<i>se / nous</i>
<i>vous</i>	<i>vous</i>	<i>vous</i>	<i>vous</i>	<i>vous</i>
<i>ils / elles</i>	<i>les</i>	<i>leur</i>	<i>eux / elles</i>	<i>se</i>

Y — "there" and "to it"

Replaces *à* + a thing or place. Sits before the verb.

Tu vas à Paris ? — Oui, j'y vais. — Yes, I'm going there.

Tu penses à ton travail ? — J'y pense tout le temps. — I think about it constantly.

On y va ! — Let's go. (Probably the single most common sentence in France.)

FROZEN Y PHRASES — LEARN AS BLOCKS

Il y a (there is) · *On y va* (let's go) · *J'y vais* (I'm off) · *Vas-y* (go on / go ahead) · *Allez-y* (formal or plural version) · *Il faut que j'y aille* (I've got to go) · *Ça y est* (that's it, done) · *J'y crois pas* (I don't believe it)

En — "of it", "some of it", "from there"

Replaces *de* + something, or a quantity. This is the one that makes learners sound native when they get it, because English has no equivalent and learners simply omit it.

Tu veux du café ? — Oui, j'en veux. — Yes, I want some.

Tu as des frères ? — J'en ai deux. — I have two (of them). The en is obligatory. « J'ai deux » alone is broken French.

Tu reviens de Paris ? — J'en reviens. — I've just come back from there.

On en parle demain. — We'll talk about it tomorrow.

THE TELL

Dropping *en* in quantity answers is the most reliable marker of a non-native speaker in the entire language. « *Combien tu en veux ? — J'en veux trois. »* Never « *Je veux trois.* ». Fix this one thing and your French ages five years overnight.

Stacking order

When several pronouns pile up before the verb, the order is fixed. You don't need the theory — you need the ladder:

1	2	3	4	5	EXAMPLE
<i>me</i>	<i>le</i>	<i>lui</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>en</i>	<i>Je te le donne.</i> — I give it to you.
<i>te</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>leur</i>			<i>Je le lui ai dit.</i> — I told him it.
<i>se</i>	<i>les</i>				<i>Il y en a.</i> — There are some of them.
<i>nous</i>					
<i>vous</i>					<i>Ne m'en parle pas !</i> — Don't get me started.

DON'T DRILL THIS

Nobody assembles these from the table in real time — natives included. They're stored as chunks. Learn the four examples above as *phrases*, and the pattern generalises on its own. If you find yourself needing a triple stack mid-sentence, just say it in two sentences. Nobody will notice.

Tu or vous — the decision

School said "*vous* is polite". True but insufficient — it's a social instrument and getting it wrong is the fastest way to create friction.

USE	WITH
<i>vous</i>	Any adult stranger. Shopkeepers, officials, waiters, taxi drivers. Anyone older. Anyone in a professional context you haven't been invited to <i>tutoyer</i> . Default to this. The cost of over-formality is a raised eyebrow; the cost of under-formality is offence.
<i>tu</i>	Friends, family, children, animals, peers your own age in casual settings, colleagues once the ice breaks, anyone who <i>tus</i> you first, and — this matters — anyone under about 30 in an informal social setting, where <i>vous</i> would feel cold.

The transition is a real, named event: « ***On peut se tutoyer ?*** » — "Shall we use *tu*?" It's a small social ceremony, usually offered by the older or more senior person. Accept with « *Avec plaisir.* »

A NOTE FROM THE MAGHREB

Algerian and Maghrebi French is noticeably quicker to *tu* than Parisian French, especially within family and community. If your grandmother's circle *tus* you immediately, that's not informality — it's warmth, and it's a different norm. In Paris, keep the *vous* default; among Algerians, follow their lead.

CHAPITRE 06 Saying no

You learned *ne ... pas*. There are eight more, and they're all built the same way.

The frame is always: *ne* + verb + *the second word*. And per Règle 2, in speech the *ne* is gone — so what you actually hear is just the second word, sitting after the verb.

STRUCTURE	MEANING	SPOKEN EXAMPLE
<i>ne ... pas</i>	not	<i>J'ai pas faim.</i> — I'm not hungry.
<i>ne ... plus</i>	no longer, not anymore	<i>J'ai plus d'argent.</i> — I've no money left. (Beware: sounds like <i>j'ai plus</i> = "I have more". Context and the silent <i>s</i> disambiguate — negation drops it, comparison keeps it.)
<i>ne ... jamais</i>	never	<i>Je vais jamais là-bas.</i>
<i>ne ... rien</i>	nothing	<i>J'ai rien fait !</i> — I didn't do anything!
<i>ne ... personne</i>	nobody	<i>Y'a personne.</i> — There's nobody.
<i>ne ... aucun(e)</i>	not a single	<i>J'ai aucune idée.</i> — I've no idea. (Very common.)
<i>ne ... que</i>	only — not a negation at all	<i>J'ai que dix euros.</i> — I've only got ten euros. (School rarely flags that this uses the negative frame but means "only". Trips everyone.)
<i>ne ... ni ... ni</i>	neither ... nor	<i>J'ai ni le temps ni l'envie.</i>
<i>ne ... guère</i>	hardly	Literary. Recognise it; don't say it.

COMPRENDS

Word order with compound tenses

Short negatives hug the auxiliary; heavy ones go to the end.

J'ai pas mangé. · *J'ai rien vu.* · *J'ai jamais compris.* — inside.

J'ai vu personne. · *J'ai vu aucun problème.* — outside. The rule of thumb: *personne* and *aucun* behave like nouns, so they land where a noun would.

Standalone negatives

All of these work as one-word answers, no verb needed: **Rien.** (Nothing.) · **Personne.** (Nobody.) · **Jamais.** (Never.) · **Pas du tout.** (Not at all.) · **Absolument pas.** (Absolutely not.) · **Pas encore.** (Not yet.) · **Plus maintenant.** (Not anymore.)

SI — THE WORD ENGLISH DOESN'T HAVE

To contradict a *negative* question or statement, French doesn't use *oui*. It uses **si**.

— *Tu n'as pas faim ?* (You're not hungry?) — **Si !** (Yes I am!)

— *Tu ne l'as pas fait.* (You didn't do it.) — **Si, si.** (Yes, I did.)

Answering *oui* there is a classic learner error and it genuinely confuses people — it reads as agreeing with the negative. Arabic has the same instinct with **بلى** — so this one should feel natural to you, and it's a free win.

CHAPITRE 07 Asking

Three registers of question. School taught you the one you'll use least.

The three ways

REGISTER	FORM	WHEN
Casual PARLE	<i>Tu viens ?</i> Statement + rising tone	The workhorse. Most spoken questions are just a statement said upward. Costs zero grammar.
Neutral PARLE	<i>Est-ce que tu viens ?</i>	Safe everywhere, spoken or written, formal or not. If in doubt, use this. Slightly clunky but never wrong.
Formal COMPRENDS	<i>Viens-tu ?</i> Inversion	Writing, speeches, deliberate politeness, some fixed phrases. In casual speech it sounds theatrical.

INVERSION ISN'T EXTINCT

It survives in frozen polite formulas you should keep active: *Puis-je ?* (May I?) · *Comment allez-vous ?* · *Voulez-vous... ?* · *Pourriez-vous... ?* · *Qu'en pensez-vous ?* — and in writing generally. So don't throw it away. Just stop making it your default.

Question words, and where they really go

WORD	SCHOOL POSITION (FRONT)	REAL POSITION (END)
<i>où</i> where	<i>Où vas-tu ?</i>	<i>Tu vas où ?</i>
<i>quand</i> when	<i>Quand pars-tu ?</i>	<i>Tu pars quand ?</i>
<i>comment</i> how	<i>Comment fais-tu ?</i>	<i>Tu fais comment ?</i>
<i>pourquoi</i> why	<i>Pourquoi pars-tu ?</i>	<i>Pourquoi tu pars ?</i> (this one stays in front)
<i>combien</i> how much	<i>Combien coûte-t-il ?</i>	<i>Ça coûte combien ?</i>
<i>qui</i> who	<i>Qui est-ce ?</i>	<i>C'est qui ?</i>
<i>quoi</i> what	<i>Que fais-tu ?</i>	<i>Tu fais quoi ?</i>
<i>quel(le)</i> which	<i>Quelle heure est-il ?</i>	<i>Il est quelle heure ?</i>

THE QUE → QUOI RULE

Que is the front-of-sentence form; *quoi* is the everywhere-else form. Since real questions put the word at the end, **you will use *quoi* far more than *que***. *Tu fais quoi ? C'est quoi ? Tu veux quoi ? Quoi ?* School drilled *Que fais-tu*; the street runs on *quoi*.

The everyday question set

Ça va ? — the universal opener, question and answer both.

C'est combien ? — how much is it?

Vous avez... ? — do you have...? (*shops*)

C'est où, ... ? — where's the...?

Vous pouvez répéter, s'il vous plaît ? — could you repeat that?

Ça veut dire quoi, ... ? — what does ... mean?

Comment on dit ... en français ? — how do you say ... in French?

Tu fais quoi dans la vie ? — what do you do for a living?

Ça te dit ? — fancy it?

On fait comment ? — how are we doing this?

THE TWO THAT WILL SAVE YOU MOST OFTEN

« *Vous pouvez répéter plus lentement, s'il vous plaît ?* » — Can you repeat that more slowly?

« *Ça veut dire quoi ?* » — What does that mean?

Say these instead of nodding. Nodding at something you didn't catch is how conversations collapse two exchanges later, and it's the single most common self-inflicted wound of a rusty speaker. Asking costs you nothing — natives read it as engagement, not weakness.

CHAPITRE 08 The verb core

A small number of verbs do a shocking proportion of the work. Get these to reflex and you can say almost anything.

The big four — non-negotiable

These four are irregular, ubiquitous, and structural: two of them are the auxiliaries that build every compound tense in the language. If your recall of these is shaky, nothing else in this book will fire.

	ÊTRE — TO BE	AVOIR — TO HAVE	ALLER — TO GO	FAIRE — TO DO/MAKE
je	<i>suis</i>	<i>ai</i>	<i>vais</i>	<i>fais</i>
tu	<i>es</i>	<i>as</i>	<i>vas</i>	<i>fais</i>
il / on	<i>est</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>va</i>	<i>fait</i>
nous	<i>sommes</i>	<i>avons</i>	<i>allons</i>	<i>faisons</i>
vous	<i>êtes</i>	<i>avez</i>	<i>allez</i>	<i>faites</i>
ils	<i>sont</i>	<i>ont</i>	<i>vont</i>	<i>font</i>
p.p.	<i>été</i>	<i>eu</i>	<i>allé (être)</i>	<i>fait</i>
imparf.	<i>j'étais</i>	<i>j'avais</i>	<i>j'allais</i>	<i>je faisais</i>
futur	<i>je serai</i>	<i>j'aurai</i>	<i>j'irai</i>	<i>je ferai</i>
cond.	<i>je serais</i>	<i>j'aurais</i>	<i>j'irais</i>	<i>je ferais</i>
subj.	<i>que je sois</i>	<i>que j'aie</i>	<i>que j'aille</i>	<i>que je fasse</i>

NOTE THE PATTERN IN *ILS*

sont, ont, vont, font — all [-5]. The four most irregular verbs in French rhyme in the third-person plural. That's not coincidence, it's shared history, and it's a free mnemonic.

Être or avoir in the past?

Almost everything takes *avoir*. The exceptions are two closed groups:

1 • All reflexive verbs — no exceptions. *Je me suis levé. On s'est vus. Elle s'est dit.*

2 • A short list of movement/state-change verbs — the classic mnemonic is **DR & MRS VANDERTRAMP**, but the honest version is: they're mostly *arriving, leaving, being born, dying, and going up or down*.

<i>aller / venir</i> — go / come	<i>arriver / partir</i> — arrive / leave	<i>entrer / sortir</i> — enter / exit
<i>monter / descendre</i> — go up / down	<i>naître / mourir</i> — be born / die	<i>rester</i> — stay
<i>tomber</i> — fall	<i>retourner / revenir</i> — return	<i>devenir</i> — become

With *être*, the participle agrees with the subject: *elle est allée, ils sont partis, on est arrivés*. Mostly silent — but you'll want it right in writing.

A TRAP SCHOOL LOVES

Some of these take *avoir* when they have a direct object, and the meaning shifts: *Je suis sorti* (I went out) vs *J'ai sorti la poubelle* (I took out the bin). Same for *monter* (*j'ai monté les valises* — I carried the cases up) and *descendre*. Recognise it; don't lose sleep over it.

The next tier — the verbs that carry conversation

VERB	JE-FORM	P.P.	THE USE THAT MATTERS
pouvoir can	<i>je peux</i>	<i>pu</i>	<i>Tu peux... ? · Je peux pas. · Ça se peut.</i> Note: <i>puis-je</i> in formal questions.
vouloir want	<i>je veux</i>	<i>voulu</i>	<i>je voudrais</i> is the polite form you'll use constantly. <i>Je veux</i> alone can sound blunt.
devoir must / owe	<i>je dois</i>	<i>dû</i>	<i>Je dois partir. · J'aurais dû</i> — I should have. <i>Il doit être malade</i> — he must be ill (deduction).
savoir know (facts)	<i>je sais</i>	<i>su</i>	<i>Je sais pas. · Tu sais quoi ?</i> — Facts and skills.
connaître know (people/places)	<i>je connais</i>	<i>connu</i>	<i>Tu connais ce resto ?</i> — Familiarity. Arabic doesn't split these; French insists.
prendre take	<i>je prends</i>	<i>pris</i>	Huge range: <i>prendre un café</i> (have), <i>prendre le métro</i> , <i>ça prend du temps</i> . Family: <i>comprendre</i> , <i>apprendre</i> .
mettre put	<i>je mets</i>	<i>mis</i>	<i>mettre un manteau</i> (wear), <i>se mettre à</i> (start doing). Family: <i>permettre</i> , <i>promettre</i> .
dire say	<i>je dis</i>	<i>dit</i>	<i>Ça te dit ?</i> (fancy it?) · <i>Ça veut dire quoi ? · vous dites</i> — irregular.
voir see	<i>je vois</i>	<i>vu</i>	<i>Je vois.</i> (I see.) · <i>On se voit demain.</i> · <i>Vas-y, on verra.</i>
venir come	<i>je viens</i>	<i>venu</i>	<i>venir de</i> + inf. = just did. <i>Je viens d'arriver.</i>
falloir must	<i>il faut</i>	<i>fallu</i>	Impersonal only. <i>Il faut y aller. · Il faut que...</i> + subjunctive.
parler speak	<i>je parle</i>	<i>parlé</i>	The regular -er model. ~90% of French verbs conjugate like this.
passer pass/spend	<i>je passe</i>	<i>passé</i>	<i>Ça va passer. · Je passe te voir. · Qu'est-ce qui se passe ?</i> — what's going on?
arriver arrive/happen	<i>j'arrive</i>	<i>arrivé</i>	<i>J'arrive !</i> = "I'm on my way / coming!" Not past. Very common.
trouver find/think	<i>je trouve</i>	<i>trouvé</i>	<i>Je trouve ça bien.</i> — the everyday way to give an opinion.
penser think	<i>je pense</i>	<i>pensé</i>	<i>Je pense que oui. · Tu penses ?</i>
croire believe	<i>je crois</i>	<i>cru</i>	<i>Je crois pas. · J'y crois pas !</i> — softer than <i>penser</i> .
attendre wait	<i>j'attends</i>	<i>attendu</i>	<i>Attends ! · Attends deux secondes.</i> — Not "attend". False friend.
rester stay	<i>je reste</i>	<i>resté</i>	<i>Il me reste dix euros.</i> — I have ten euros left. Not "to rest".
tenir hold	<i>je tiens</i>	<i>tenu</i>	<i>Tiens !</i> — "here you go" / "well well". Fired constantly.

The three constructions that replace half your grammar

PATTERN	WHAT IT BUYS YOU
aller + infinitive	The entire future. <i>Je vais manger, on va voir, tu vas adorer.</i>
venir de + infinitive	The immediate past. <i>Je viens de manger</i> — I've just eaten.
être en train de + inf.	The progressive French supposedly doesn't have. <i>Je suis en train de travailler</i> — I'm (currently) working. Use it when you need to stress "right now".

THE INFINITIVE ESCAPE HATCH

Any verb you can't conjugate, you can still use — hang it off a verb you *can* conjugate. Stuck on *résoudre*? Say « *Je vais résoudre ça* », « *Je dois résoudre ça* », « *J'essaie de résoudre ça* ». The infinitive never changes. Master the twenty verbs above and you can express any of the other five thousand without conjugating a single one of them.

CHAPITRE 09 The word core

Not a dictionary. The words that recur — grouped so your existing memory has something to hook onto.

Read these as a *recognition* exercise, not a memorisation one. Most will land with a click of "oh, yes, of course". That click is the whole point: it's your index rebuilding.

Time

<i>aujourd'hui</i> — today	<i>hier</i> — yesterday	<i>demain</i> — tomorrow
<i>avant-hier</i> — day before yest.	<i>après-demain</i> — day after tom.	<i>maintenant</i> — now
<i>tout de suite</i> — right now	<i>bientôt</i> — soon	<i>tard / tôt</i> — late / early
<i>toujours</i> — always/still	<i>souvent</i> — often	<i>parfois, des fois</i> — sometimes
<i>rarement</i> — rarely	<i>déjà</i> — already	<i>encore</i> — again/still
<i>enfin</i> — finally/well	<i>d'abord</i> — first	<i>ensuite, puis</i> — then
<i>pendant</i> — during	<i>depuis</i> — since/for	<i>jusqu'à</i> — until
<i>une semaine</i> — week	<i>un mois</i> — month	<i>une année / un an</i> — year
<i>le matin</i> — morning	<i>l'après-midi</i> — afternoon	<i>le soir / la nuit</i> — evening/night

DEPUIS — THE TENSE TRAP

French uses the **present** where English uses the perfect. « *J'habite ici depuis dix ans* » — literally "I live here since ten years", meaning "I have lived here for ten years". Saying « *J'ai habité ici depuis dix ans* » is the classic English-brain error. Present tense. Always.

Place & direction

<i>ici</i> — here	<i>là</i> — there	<i>là-bas</i> — over there
<i>à côté de</i> — next to	<i>en face de</i> — opposite	<i>à droite / à gauche</i> — right/left
<i>tout droit</i> — straight on	<i>devant / derrière</i> — in front/behind	<i>sous / sur</i> — under/on
<i>dans</i> — in	<i>chez</i> — at (someone's)	<i>entre</i> — between
<i>loin / près</i> — far / near	<i>dehors / dedans</i> — outside/inside	<i>partout</i> — everywhere

CHEZ — A WORD ENGLISH ENVIES

No English equivalent. *chez moi* (at my place), *chez le médecin* (at the doctor's), *chez Renault* (at Renault), *chez les Français* (among the French). Learn it as a preposition meaning "at the place/home/premises/culture of". You'll use it daily.

People & relations

<i>un homme / une femme</i>	<i>un garçon / une fille</i>	<i>un enfant / un gamin — kid</i>
<i>un ami / une amie — friend</i>	<i>un copain / une copine — mate/BF/GF</i>	<i>un pote — buddy (fam.)</i>
<i>un mec / un type — guy</i>	<i>une meuf / une nana — girl</i>	<i>les gens — people</i>
<i>la famille</i>	<i>les parents</i>	<i>un frère / une sœur</i>
<i>un fils / une fille — son/daughter</i>	<i>un grand-père / une grand-mère</i>	<i>un voisin — neighbour</i>
<i>un collègue</i>	<i>un patron — boss</i>	<i>un inconnu — stranger</i>

The high-frequency adjectives

<i>bon / mauvais — good/bad</i>	<i>bien / mal — well/badly</i>	<i>grand / petit</i>
<i>beau / moche — beautiful/ugly</i>	<i>jeune / vieux</i>	<i>nouveau / ancien</i>
<i>facile / difficile</i>	<i>cher / pas cher — expensive/cheap</i>	<i>chaud / froid</i>
<i>content / triste</i>	<i>fatigué — tired</i>	<i>prêt — ready</i>
<i>sûr — sure</i>	<i>vrai / faux</i>	<i>plein / vide — full/empty</i>
<i>génial, super — great</i>	<i>nul — rubbish</i>	<i>bizarre, chelou — weird</i>
<i>gentil — kind</i>	<i>méchant — mean</i>	<i>sympa — nice (constant)</i>
<i>grave — serious</i>	<i>marrant, drôle — funny</i>	<i>relou — annoying (fam.)</i>

TWO WORDS DOING STRANGE WORK

Sympa — short for *sympathique*. Means "nice/pleasant" and applies to people, places, evenings, jackets, everything. If you learn one adjective from this page, this one.

Grave — literally "serious", but among younger speakers it became an intensifier meaning "totally / so much". « — T'es d'accord ? — Grave. » = "Absolutely." Recognise it; it will confuse you otherwise.

Quantity & degree

<i>beaucoup — a lot</i>	<i>un peu — a little</i>	<i>trop — too much / very (fam.)</i>
<i>assez — enough / quite</i>	<i>très — very</i>	<i>vraiment — really</i>
<i>plus / moins — more/less</i>	<i>presque — almost</i>	<i>environ — about</i>
<i>tout / tous — all</i>	<i>quelques — a few</i>	<i>plusieurs — several</i>
<i>chaque — each</i>	<i>la plupart — most</i>	<i>carrément — totally</i>

Connectors — the load-bearing words

<i>et — and</i>	<i>mais — but</i>	<i>ou — or</i>
<i>parce que — because</i>	<i>donc — so/therefore</i>	<i>alors — so/then</i>
<i>si — if</i>	<i>quand — when</i>	<i>comme — as/like</i>
<i>pourtant — yet/however</i>	<i>quand même — still/anyway</i>	<i>par contre — on the other hand</i>
<i>d'ailleurs — besides</i>	<i>surtout — especially</i>	<i>sinon — otherwise</i>
<i>pour — for/in order to</i>	<i>sans — without</i>	<i>avec — with</i>

QUAND MÊME – UNTRANSLATABLE, INDISPENSABLE

Roughly "still / anyway / even so / for goodness' sake", depending entirely on tone. « *C'est cher, mais je le prends quand même.* » (...all the same.) « *Quand même !* » as an exclamation = "Honestly!" / "Come on!". Natives use it constantly; learners never do. Stealing it is high-leverage.

CHAPITRE 10 Glue

The discourse markers. Grammatically optional, socially mandatory. This is the difference between correct French and human French.

Every language has a layer of small words that carry no dictionary meaning and do all the emotional and structural work — English has *like, you know, I mean, so, actually, anyway*. French has its own set, and school taught you exactly none of them, because they can't be marked.

Put three of these into your speech and natives will recalibrate their estimate of your level upward immediately — more than any tense will do for you.

MARKER	ROUGH SENSE	HOW IT'S ACTUALLY USED
<i>du coup</i>	so / as a result	The defining filler of modern French. Technically "consequently", in practice a general connector fired several times per minute. « <i>Du coup, on fait quoi ?</i> » If you adopt one item from this chapter, adopt this.
<i>en fait</i> [ɑ̃fɛt]	actually / in fact	Correcting or clarifying — usually gently. « <i>En fait, c'est pas ça.</i> » Note the <i>t</i> is pronounced here.
<i>bref</i>	anyway / long story short	Closes a digression. « <i>...bref, on est rentrés.</i> »
<i>quoi</i>	(untranslatable)	Sentence- final emphasis, meaning roughly "...you know?" / "...that's just how it is". « <i>C'est nul, quoi.</i> » Extremely common, slightly casual. Not a question.
<i>genre</i>	like	Exactly English "like" — hedging, approximating, quoting. « <i>Il était genre super énervé.</i> » Younger register.
<i>ben</i> [bɛ̃]	well...	Hesitation opener. « <i>Ben... je sais pas.</i> » Written <i>bah</i> too. Ubiquitous and invisible to learners.
<i>voilà</i>	there / that's it	Does enormous work: handing something over, concluding, agreeing, filling silence. « <i>Voilà.</i> » alone can end a paragraph.
<i>tu vois</i>	you see / you know	Checking comprehension, buying time. « <i>C'est compliqué, tu vois.</i> »
<i>tu sais</i>	you know	Same family, slightly more emphatic.
<i>franchement</i>	honestly	Prefaces an opinion with weight. « <i>Franchement, c'était nul.</i> »
<i>carrément</i>	totally / absolutely	Emphatic agreement, works standalone. « — <i>Tu viens ? — Carrément !</i> »
<i>enfin</i>	well / I mean	Self-correction. « <i>Il est sympa, enfin, je crois.</i> » Distinct from <i>enfin</i> = "finally".
<i>d'accord</i>	OK	Agreement. Often just « <i>D'ac</i> » in speech.
<i>ça marche</i>	works for me	Casual "deal / OK". Very common in arrangements.
<i>n'importe quoi</i>	nonsense / whatever	Dismissal. « <i>Il raconte n'importe quoi.</i> » — He's talking rubbish.
<i>c'est-à-dire</i>	that is to say	Clarifier. Also a standalone question: « <i>C'est-à-dire ?</i> » — "Meaning?"
<i>ehh...</i>	uh...	The French hesitation noise. Not "um". If you hesitate in English, you leak your accent through the filler. Switch even your stalling.

THE STARTER SET

Don't try to install sixteen markers. Take **four**: *du coup*, *en fait*, *voilà*, *quoi*. Use them deliberately, even self-consciously, for two weeks. They'll go automatic, and your French will cross a line that no amount of tense work would have crossed.

REGISTER WARNING

Genre and sentence-final *quoi* are casual. They're perfect with friends and slightly off in a job interview — exactly like "like" in English. *Du coup*, *en fait* and *voilà* are safe everywhere.

CHAPITRE 11 Scripts

Real exchanges, in real register. Read them aloud. These are the situations that actually happen.

Le café

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| SERVEUR | <i>Bonjour, qu'est-ce que je vous sers ?</i>
Hello, what can I get you? |
| VOUS | <i>Un café, s'il vous plaît.</i>
A coffee please. (= an espresso. If you want a long one: <i>un allongé</i> . With milk: <i>un noisette</i> (a drop) or <i>un crème</i> (proper milky). "Un café au lait" is a breakfast-at-home thing.) |
| SERVEUR | <i>Autre chose ?</i>
Anything else? |
| VOUS | <i>Non, ça sera tout, merci.</i>
No, that'll be all, thanks. |
| SERVEUR | <i>Je vous en prie.</i>
You're welcome. |
| VOUS | <i>L'addition, s'il vous plaît !</i>
The bill, please! (Later. Catch their eye — don't shout.) |

THE RULE THAT OUTRANKS YOUR GRAMMAR

Always say « Bonjour » first. Walking into any French shop and opening with your request — however fluent — is read as genuinely rude. *Bonjour* is not a greeting; it's an acknowledgment that a person exists before a transaction does. Omitting it is the single most common reason a French shopkeeper turns cold on a foreigner. And « *Bonjour* » before your broken French beats perfect French without it. Every time.

Le taxi

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| VOUS | <i>Bonjour, vous êtes libre ?</i>
Hello, are you free? |
| VOUS | <i>Gare du Nord, s'il vous plaît.</i>
Just name the place. No sentence needed. |
| VOUS | <i>C'est combien, à peu près ?</i>
Roughly how much? |
| VOUS | <i>Vous pouvez me déposer ici ?</i>
Can you drop me here? |
| VOUS | <i>Gardez la monnaie.</i>
Keep the change. |

Chez le médecin

MÉDECIN	<i>Qu'est-ce qui vous amène ?</i> What brings you in?
VOUS	<i>J'ai mal à la tête depuis trois jours.</i> I've had a headache for three days. (<i>avoir mal à</i> + body part. Note: present tense with <i>depuis</i> .)
VOUS	<i>J'ai mal au ventre / à la gorge / au dos / aux dents.</i> stomach / throat / back / teeth
VOUS	<i>J'ai de la fièvre. Je tousse. Je suis fatigué tout le temps.</i> I have a fever. I'm coughing. I'm tired constantly.
MÉDECIN	<i>Vous êtes allergique à quelque chose ?</i> Are you allergic to anything?
VOUS	<i>Pas que je sache.</i> Not that I know of. — a lovely little subjunctive, worth memorising whole.

Au téléphone

VOUS	<i>Allô ?</i> Hello? — Phone only. Never as a greeting in person.
VOUS	<i>Bonjour, c'est Taha à l'appareil.</i> Hello, it's Taha speaking.
VOUS	<i>Je peux parler à Madame Benali, s'il vous plaît ?</i> May I speak to Mrs Benali?
EUX	<i>C'est de la part de qui ?</i> Who's calling? — a fixed phrase, learn it whole.
EUX	<i>Ne quittez pas, je vous la passe.</i> Hold on, I'll put you through.
VOUS	<i>Je rappellerai plus tard. Merci, bonne journée !</i> I'll call back later. Thanks, have a good day!

L'appartement

VOUS	<i>L'appartement est toujours disponible ?</i> Is the flat still available? (<i>toujours</i> = "still" here, not "always".)
VOUS	<i>C'est combien le loyer, charges comprises ?</i> How much is the rent, bills included?
AGENT	<i>Il faut un garant et deux mois de caution.</i> You need a guarantor and two months' deposit.
VOUS	<i>Je peux visiter quand ?</i> When can I view it? (<i>visiter</i> = to view a property.)

La dispute

Not to start one — to recognise one. This is the register where speech is fastest and most reduced, and where you'll understand least.

- *Ça va pas, non ?!*
Are you out of your mind?!
- *N'importe quoi !*
Rubbish! / That's nonsense!
- *Tu te fous de moi ?*
Are you kidding me? (crude-ish)
- *Laisse tomber.*
Drop it. / Forget it.
- *C'est pas la peine.*
It's not worth it. / Don't bother.
- *Calme-toi. On en parle plus tard.*
Calm down. We'll talk later. — your exit line.

Le flirt

Understated is the register. French flirting is oblique; the heavy compliment lands badly.

- *On se connaît, non ?*
Don't we know each other?
- *Tu fais quoi dans la vie ?*
What do you do? — the standard opener.
- *Ça te dit de prendre un verre ?*
Fancy getting a drink? — *prendre un verre* is the phrase.
- *Je te laisse mon numéro.*
I'll leave you my number.
- *C'est gentil, mais non merci.*
That's kind, but no thanks. — the polite decline, both directions.

Se débrouiller — the survival kit

Je suis désolé, je n'ai pas compris. — Sorry, I didn't understand.

Vous pouvez parler plus lentement ? — Can you speak more slowly?

Comment ? — Sorry, what? (*Politer than Quoi ?*, which is blunt.)

Je cherche mes mots. — I'm looking for my words. (*Buys you enormous goodwill.*)

Je parle un peu français, mais je suis rouillé. — I speak a bit of French but I'm rusty. (*rouillé* — literally "rusty".
Exactly your situation, and it charms people.)

Excusez-moi de vous déranger. — Sorry to bother you.

Vous parlez anglais ? — the last resort. Try not to reach for it.

CHAPITRE 12 La langue de ta grand-mère

The Algerian layer. Not a curiosity — your cheapest and most durable vocabulary, because you're not learning it. You're remembering it.

French and Arabic have been colliding in the Maghreb for a hundred and thirty years. That collision left a two-way traffic of words that no textbook covers and that you have been passively absorbing your whole life. This chapter is about mining it.

Why this is an advantage and not a footnote

Words learned *ambiently* — attached to a person, a room, a smell, a tone of voice — are stored more durably than words revised from a list, and they're retrieved faster. You have a store of French that was never a school subject. It's attached to your grandmother, and it never had to survive an exam to stay in your head.

The catch is that it's **unindexed**. You know these words but you don't know that you know them. Reading them here is the index.

Arabic → French: words that made the crossing

These are in standard French dictionaries. Every French person uses them, most without knowing the origin. You get them free.

FRENCH	FROM	NOTE
<i>un toubib</i>	طبيب	Doctor. Casual but universal — every French person says it.
<i>bézeuf / bésef</i>	بزأف	"A lot" — usually negative: « <i>pas bézeuf</i> » = not much.
<i>le kif / kiffer</i>	كيف	<i>Je kiffe ça</i> = I love that. Now completely mainstream French slang.
<i>un maboul</i>	مهبول	Crazy. Older register but alive.
<i>la smala</i>	زماله	The whole (large) family/entourage. Slightly ironic.
<i>un souk</i>	سوق	Also figurative: « <i>quel souk !</i> » = what a mess.
<i>le barda</i>	بردعة	Kit, gear, all one's stuff.
<i>avoir la baraka</i>	بركة	To be lucky/blessed.
<i>le méchoui</i>	مشوي	Roast lamb — fully naturalised.
<i>un clebs / clébard</i>	كلب	Dog (pejorative).
<i>le fissa</i>	في الساعة	« <i>Fais ça fissa</i> » = do it quickly. Army slang originally.
<i>un bled</i>	بلد	Village / the old country / the middle of nowhere. Used by everyone.
<i>chouïa</i>	شوية	A little bit. « <i>Un chouïa de sucre.</i> »
<i>nickel</i>	—	Not Arabic, but note it anyway: means "perfect / spotless". « <i>C'est nickel.</i> »
<i>le mektoub</i>	مكتوب	Fate, what's written. Used in French with the same fatalism.
<i>un caïd</i>	قائد	Now means a gang leader / big shot.

FRENCH	FROM	NOTE
<i>le ramdam</i>	رمضان	Racket, uproar — from the noise of nights in Ramadan. Natives have no idea.
<i>un gourbi</i>	قربي	A hovel, a tip. « Range ton gourbi. »

French → Darija: words that went the other way

The reverse traffic is even heavier. If you've heard your grandmother speak Algerian Arabic, you have already been hearing French — you just filed it as Arabic. Some of what's in there:

<i>la table</i> → طابطة	<i>la cuisine</i> → كوزينة	<i>la douche</i> → دوش
<i>le train</i> → تران	<i>le téléphone</i> → تيليفون	<i>la voiture</i> → طوموبيل (<i>automobile</i>)
<i>le tricot</i> → تريكو	<i>la serviette</i> → سرفيطة	<i>le sac</i> → ساك
<i>normal</i> → نورمال	<i>ça va</i> → صافا	<i>bonjour</i> → بونجور
<i>le ticket</i> → تيكيتي	<i>la clé</i> → كلي	<i>merci</i> → ميرسي

THE EXERCISE — DO THIS ONE, GENUINELY

Sit with your grandmother. Ask her to talk about her childhood, her kitchen, her town — anything domestic and old. Don't take notes on the Arabic. **Listen for the French coming through**, and write down every French word you catch.

You will be startled. Kitchen vocabulary, household objects, administration, medicine, school, transport — whole domains of her Arabic run on French loanwords. Every one you catch is a word you already own, attached to a person you love, which is roughly the strongest memory anchor that exists. No flashcard will ever compete with that.

How Maghrebi French differs

If your ear was trained on Algerian French, some of what feels normal to you will read as marked in Paris. Worth knowing which is which — not to correct yourself, but to know what you're doing.

FEATURE	WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU
The <i>r</i>	Maghrebi French often keeps a more forward, tapped <i>r</i> under Arabic influence. Parisian French is uvular. Neither is wrong; they're accents. But if you want to sound metropolitan, chapter 2 is the fix.
Faster <i>tu</i>	The <i>tu/vous</i> boundary sits closer than in France. Follow the room.
Code-switching	Mid-sentence switching between French and Darija is <i>normal</i> in the Maghreb and reads as <i>incomplete</i> in France. Same behaviour, different meaning.
Religious formulas	<i>inch'Allah</i> , <i>hamdollah</i> , <i>wallah</i> pass into Maghrebi French unremarkably. In metropolitan French they're strongly marked as Maghrebi — which may be exactly what you want, or not.
Retained vocabulary	Some Maghrebi French preserves older metropolitan words that France itself has dropped. If a French person looks puzzled at a word your grandmother uses, that's often why — it's not wrong, it's <i>older</i> .

DON'T SAND IT OFF

A Maghrebi-inflected French is not a deficient French. It's the French of tens of millions of people, with its own literature and its own history, and there is nothing to apologise for in it. Know where the differences are so that your choices are *choices*. But the goal isn't to erase your grandmother from your mouth. It's to be able to switch consciously when the room asks for it.

CHAPITRE 13 False friends

The words that look like English or feel like Arabic, and betray you.

FRENCH	ACTUALLY MEANS	NOT...
<i>actuellement</i>	currently, right now	<i>actually</i> → <i>en fait</i>
<i>éventuellement</i>	possibly, if need be	<i>eventually</i> → <i>finalelement</i>
<i>sensible</i>	sensitive	<i>sensible</i> → <i>raisonnable</i>
<i>attendre</i>	to wait	<i>to attend</i> → <i>assister à</i>
<i>rester</i>	to stay, remain	<i>to rest</i> → <i>se reposer</i>
<i>demander</i>	to ask	<i>to demand</i> → <i>exiger</i>
<i>assister à</i>	to attend	<i>to assist</i> → <i>aider</i>
<i>location</i>	rental	<i>location</i> → <i>l'endroit, le lieu</i>
<i>librairie</i>	bookshop	<i>library</i> → <i>bibliothèque</i>
<i>journée</i>	day (the span of it)	<i>journey</i> → <i>voyage, trajet</i>
<i>monnaie</i>	change (coins)	<i>money</i> → <i>argent</i>
<i>pain</i>	bread	<i>pain</i> → <i>douleur</i>
<i>coin</i>	corner	<i>coin</i> → <i>pièce</i>
<i>chair</i>	flesh	<i>chair</i> → <i>chaise</i>
<i>raisin</i>	grape	<i>raisin</i> → <i>raisin sec</i>
<i>préservatif</i>	condom	<i>preservative</i> → <i>conservateur</i> . Check the jam label.
<i>excité</i>	aroused	<i>excited</i> → <i>enthousiaste, impatient</i> . Do not say « <i>je suis excité</i> » about a meeting.
<i>introduire</i>	to insert	<i>to introduce (a person)</i> → <i>présenter</i> . Another one to be careful with.
<i>blessé</i>	to wound, injure	<i>to bless</i> → <i>bénir</i>
<i>grand</i>	tall / big	<i>grand</i> → <i>grandiose</i>
<i>gentil</i>	kind	<i>gentle</i> → <i>doux</i>
<i>passer un examen</i>	to sit an exam	<i>to pass</i> → <i>réussir</i> . This one costs people jobs.
<i>rendez-vous</i>	any appointment	Not necessarily romantic. Your dentist gives you one.
<i>déception</i>	disappointment	<i>deception</i> → <i>tromperie</i>
<i>envie</i>	desire, want	<i>avoir envie de</i> = to fancy. Not <i>envy</i> (→ <i>jalousie</i>).

THE ARABIC-SPEAKER'S SPECIAL

Arabic doesn't distinguish **p** and **b** phonemically. French does, ruthlessly, and the pairs are live minefields: *pain* (bread) / *bain* (bath) · *poisson* (fish) / *boisson* (drink) · *pu* / *bu* · *peau* (skin) / *beau* (beautiful).

Ordering « *un poisson* » when you meant « *une boisson* » is a rite of passage. The fix is aspiration: French **p** is a clean, unvoiced stop. Hold a sheet of paper in front of your mouth — it should twitch on *pain* and stay still on *bain*.

CHAPITRE 14 Numbers, time, money

Where French becomes, briefly, a maths exam.

The absurdity, explained

French counts in twenties above sixty — a fossil of a Celtic base-20 system that survived into a base-10 language. The result:

N°	FRENCH	LITERALLY
70	<i>soixante-dix</i>	sixty-ten
71	<i>soixante-et-onze</i>	sixty-and-eleven
75	<i>soixante-quinze</i>	sixty-fifteen
80	<i>quatre-vingts</i>	four-twenties
81	<i>quatre-vingt-un</i>	four-twenty-one
90	<i>quatre-vingt-dix</i>	four-twenty-ten
95	<i>quatre-vingt-quinze</i>	four-twenty-fifteen
97	<i>quatre-vingt-dix-sept</i>	four-twenty-ten-seven — i.e. $(4 \times 20) + 10 + 7$
99	<i>quatre-vingt-dix-neuf</i>	four-twenty-ten-nine

YOU'RE NOT SLOW — IT'S GENUINELY HARDER

Hearing "97" in French requires you to parse *four-twenty-ten-seven* and do arithmetic, in real time, while the speaker moves on. Native French children take noticeably longer to master numbers than children learning almost any neighbouring language. Studies on numerical cognition have measured the cost. So when a price gets rattled off and you blank: that's the language's fault, not yours.

Belgium and Switzerland fixed it, sensibly: *septante* (70), *huitante/octante* (80, Switzerland), *nonante* (90). Recognise them — you'll hear them from Belgians and they're a delight. Don't use them in France; you'll sound charmingly foreign.

Telling the time

Il est quelle heure ? — what time is it? (Not *Quelle heure est-il* in speech.)

Il est trois heures. — 3:00

Il est trois heures et quart. — 3:15

Il est trois heures et demie. — 3:30

Il est quatre heures moins le quart. — 3:45 (*four minus a quarter*)

Il est midi / minuit. — noon / midnight

Officially — timetables, appointments, anything written — France runs on the **24-hour clock**: « *Le train part à dix-neuf heures trente.* » (19:30). Get comfortable with it; your train won't wait while you convert.

Money

Ça fait combien ? / C'est combien ? — how much?

Ça fait douze euros cinquante. — €12.50 (*said "twelve euros fifty" — the word centimes is usually dropped*)

Vous payez comment ? — how are you paying?

Par carte. / En espèces. — by card / in cash

Vous avez la monnaie ? — do you have change?

C'est trop cher. — it's too expensive

C'est une bonne affaire. — it's a good deal

THE LISTENING DRILL THAT PAYS FOR ITSELF

Numbers are where the rusty speaker collapses most reliably, because they're unpredictable, fast, and consequential — prices, platforms, addresses, phone numbers. Drill them separately from everything else. Have someone read random two- and three-digit numbers aloud; write them down. Ten minutes a day for a week and the 70–99 panic disappears permanently.

Phone numbers are read in **pairs**: 06 12 34 56 78 → « zéro six, douze, trente-quatre, cinquante-six, soixante-dix-huit ». Not digit by digit. This trips up everyone exactly once.

CHAPITRE 15 Reflexes

Fixed expressions natives fire without thinking. Learn them whole — never parse them.

Do not analyse these grammatically. They are single units of meaning that happen to be spelled with spaces. Treat each as one word.

Social lubricant

<i>Bonjour / Bonsoir</i>	Non-negotiable. Bonsoir from roughly 6pm.
<i>Bonne journée / soirée</i>	Said on leaving. Always reciprocate.
<i>Je vous en prie</i>	You're welcome / after you / please do.
<i>De rien</i>	You're welcome (<i>casual</i>).
<i>Pardon / Excusez-moi</i>	Sorry (bumping) / excuse me (getting attention).
<i>S'il vous plaît / s'te plaît</i>	Formal / casual please.
<i>Enchanté</i>	Nice to meet you.
<i>À bientôt / à plus / à toute</i>	See you soon / later / very soon. « À plus » is said [aplys] — the s sounds.
<i>Bon courage</i>	Good luck with it / hang in there. Said to anyone facing something hard. Lovely, and constant.
<i>Bon appétit</i>	Said before eating, to anyone eating. Skipping it is rude.
<i>Santé !</i>	Cheers.
<i>À tes souhaits</i>	Bless you (after a sneeze).

Reaction

<i>C'est pas grave</i>	No worries / it's fine. Enormously useful.
<i>Ça marche</i>	Works for me.
<i>Ça dépend</i>	It depends. Buys time.
<i>Tant pis</i>	Never mind / too bad. Resignation.
<i>Tant mieux</i>	So much the better.
<i>Ça y est</i>	That's it / done.
<i>Voilà</i>	There / exactly / that's it.
<i>C'est ça</i>	That's right.
<i>Bien sûr</i>	Of course.
<i>Ça m'étonne pas</i>	Doesn't surprise me.
<i>N'importe quoi</i>	Nonsense.
<i>Laisse tomber</i>	Forget it / drop it.
<i>Ça craint</i>	That sucks.

<i>C'est dingue / c'est fou</i>	That's mad.
<i>Sérieux ?</i>	Seriously?
<i>Tiens !</i>	Here you go / well well. Fired constantly.
<i>Bof.</i>	Meh. The most French noise in existence.
<i>Ouais</i>	Yeah. <i>Oui</i> 's casual cousin — you'll hear it far more than <i>oui</i> .

Idioms worth owning

<i>Il faut que j'y aille</i>	I've got to go. <i>The great conversation-ender.</i>
<i>Ça te dit ?</i>	Fancy it?
<i>Je m'en fous</i>	I don't care. <i>Crude-ish. Softer: ça m'est égal.</i>
<i>J'en ai marre</i>	I'm fed up. <i>Stronger: j'en ai ras-le-bol.</i>
<i>Ça vaut le coup</i>	It's worth it.
<i>Avoir le cafard</i>	To feel down. (<i>Literally: to have the cockroach.</i>)
<i>Poser un lapin</i>	To stand someone up. (<i>To place a rabbit.</i>)
<i>Ça coûte les yeux de la tête</i>	It costs a fortune. (<i>The eyes from your head.</i>)
<i>Revenons à nos moutons</i>	Back to the subject. (<i>Back to our sheep. From a 15th-c. farce.</i>)
<i>Être à l'ouest</i>	To be out of it, spaced out. (<i>To be in the west.</i>)
<i>Se prendre la tête</i>	To overthink / stress out.
<i>C'est du gâteau</i>	It's a piece of cake.
<i>Avoir un poil dans la main</i>	To be bone idle. (<i>A hair in the palm.</i>)
<i>Faire la grasse matinée</i>	To have a lie-in. (<i>To do the fat morning.</i>)
<i>Ça m'arrange</i>	That suits me.
<i>Je me débrouille</i>	I manage / I get by. <i>The answer to "do you speak French?" Modest, accurate, and very French.</i>

THE BEST ANSWER YOU CAN GIVE

« — Vous parlez français ? — Je me débrouille. »

"I get by." It's modest, it's idiomatic, it's what a native would say, and it sets expectations perfectly without either boasting or apologising. It is also, for you, precisely true.

CHAPITRE 16 Thirty days

A plan sized for a person who already has the language and needs the index rebuilt. Not a course. A reactivation.

The premise throughout: you're not acquiring, you're *retrieving*. That changes what works. Input volume matters more than study. Speaking matters more than accuracy. And the schedule below assumes 30–45 minutes a day — more than that on this kind of work has sharply diminishing returns, because retrieval strengthens with *repetition across days*, not hours within one.

Semaine 1 — Unblock the ear

Do nothing but listen. No grammar. Your comprehension is the bottleneck and everything downstream is gated on it.

- **30 min/day of native French audio.** Not learner content — real speech. French news radio, a podcast, a series with French subtitles (never English ones: English subtitles teach you to read English).
- **Aim for 50–60% comprehension.** If you're getting 90%, it's too easy and nothing is happening. If you're under 30%, it's too hard.
- **Hunt for chapter 4.** Every time you catch a *chais pas*, a *y'a*, a *du coup*, a dropped *ne* — note it. You're training your ear to expect reduction instead of being ambushed by it.
- **Ten minutes on numbers.** Separately. Every day.

Semaine 2 — Reactivate production

Now start speaking — badly, out loud, alone. Nobody is listening. The point is to reopen the motor pathway.

- **Narrate your day aloud in French.** « *Je vais faire un café. Il est huit heures. Je suis fatigué.* » Ten minutes. Simple sentences. Present and *futur proche* only.
- **Install the four markers** — *du coup*, *en fait*, *voilà*, *quoi*. Force them in, awkwardly, until they stop being a decision.
- **Apply Règle 1 and 2 ruthlessly.** Never say *nous*. Never say *ne*. It will feel wrong for three days and then feel like the language.
- **Keep the listening going.** Don't drop week 1 — it stacks.

Semaine 3 — The past, and the interactive page

- **Narrate yesterday.** Forces *passé composé* and *imparfait* into live use. The interruption test from chapter 3 is your guide.
- **Work through the interactive page.** Repeatedly. It's built for exactly this week — the swap drills are recall practice, which is the mechanism that actually rebuilds retrieval.
- **The grandmother session.** Chapter 12's exercise. Do it this week; it's the highest-value hour in the whole plan and it isn't really about French.
- **Read the scripts aloud** until the *café* and *taxi* ones are automatic.

Semaine 4 — Contact

- **Talk to a human.** A tutor, a language exchange, your grandmother, anyone. This is the week that decides whether the previous three stick. There is no substitute and no way around it.
- **Open with « *Je parle français, mais je suis un peu rouillé.* »** It's true, it's charming, and it buys you patience.
- **Use « *Ça veut dire quoi ?* » instead of nodding.** Every single time.
- **Don't chase accuracy.** Chase *flow*. A fluent sentence with a wrong gender beats a perfect sentence that took nine seconds to build. Nobody has ever failed to understand « *le table* ».

AFTER THIRTY DAYS

You will not be finished — nobody ever is. But the shape of the problem will have changed: from "I studied French for six years and can't speak it" to "I speak French and I'm improving". That's not a small distinction. It's the whole thing.

The rest is contact hours. Keep listening, keep talking, and let the sixteen tenses sort themselves into their proper places — five you use, seven you recognise, four you'll never think about again.

UNE DERNIÈRE CHOSE

Six years on Palestine Street gave you more than you've been giving them credit for. The syllabus was aimed at the wrong target — but the machinery it built is real, and it's still in there, intact.

And somewhere underneath all of it, further down than any classroom reached, there's a woman from Algeria whose French you've been hearing since before you could read. That's not nothing. That might be the best part of what you have.

Bon courage. Tu vas y arriver.