

A **verb** may be defined as the 'action word of the sentence'. To determine whether a word is a verb or not, consider its role in the sentence. How is the word 'access' used in the following sentences?

Never give strangers **access** to your bank account.
If you can't **access** the web pages during peak hours, try again.

In the first sentence, 'access' is a thing (a noun) that you can give to somebody. In the second sentence, 'access' is something you do (a verb) with your computer. The point is that whether a word is considered a noun or a verb depends on how it is used in the sentence.

infinitives and conjugations

When you study verbs, you will need to know the difference between the infinitive form of the verb and the finite forms, or conjugated forms. English infinitives are preceded by the word 'to'.

to eat, to drink, to sleep

These verbs are called infinitives because, like the concept of infinity, they are not bound by time. From the infinitive, we derive the conjugated forms of the verb, also known as the finite forms of the verb. They are called finite because they refer to events anchored in time, that is, to events that have a particular tense: past, present, future. Note the conjugated forms of the infinitive 'to study'.

I **studied** French *past tense conjugation*
in high school.

I **am studying** French *present tense conjugation*
in college this semester.

I **will study** French *future tense conjugation*
next year overseas.

Verb conjugations are traditionally presented in textbooks according to **paradigms**, a grammatical term for pattern. A paradigm always includes the infinitive followed by the conjugations according to **person** which is divided into first, second and third, as well as number, which is the distinction between singular and plural.



Here is the paradigm for the present tense of the French verb **parler**, 'to speak'.

parler		
	singular	plural
1st person	je parle (I speak)	nous parlons (we speak)
2nd person	tu parles (you speak)	vous parlez (you speak)
3rd person	il/elle/on parle (he/she/it speaks)	ils/elles parlent (they speak)

Regular French verbs fall into three classes based on the last two letters of the verb. Each class has a particular pattern of conjugation. These classes of verbs are generally referred to as first conjugation, second conjugation and

third conjugation.

first conjugation (-er verbs)	
danser	to dance
regarder	to watch

second conjugation (-ir verbs)	
finir	to finish
obéir	to obey

third conjugation (-re verbs)	
vendre	to sell
entendre	to listen

participles

A participle is a special verb form that is derived from the infinitive but is not conjugated. In other words, while conjugations come in paradigms of six forms according to six different persons, participles have only two forms, named according to their uses: the present participle and the past participle.

A present participle in French ends in -ant and is frequently used as an adjective. French present participles are usually translated by the -ing form of the English verb. Note that the adjectival form of the present participle must agree in number and gender with the noun it modifies. In the example, the participle is made to agree with the plural noun (les animaux) by adding **-s**.

Les tatous sont des animaux **fascinants**. Armadillos are fascinating animals.

A past participle in French is used to form compound tenses, such as the 'passé composé'. A past participle can also be used as an adjective in certain contexts. When used as an adjective, the participle agrees in number and gender with the noun it qualifies.

Tex a **perdu** une lettre d'amour de
Bette.

Tex lost a love letter from Bette.

Et Tammy a trouvé la lettre **perdue**!

And Tammy found the lost letter!

In the first example, the participle 'perdu' combines with the auxiliary verb to form the past tense of **perdre** (to lose). In the second example, the participle is used as an adjective to modify the noun 'la lettre'. Note how the final **-e** on the participle indicates agreement with the feminine noun.

common auxiliaries and modals

Auxiliaries, often called 'helping verbs', are verbs that combine with the main verb to form a verb phrase. There are two groups of auxiliary verbs: common auxiliaries and modals. The two common auxiliary verbs in French, **avoir** (to have) and **être** (to be) are used to form many tenses. A tense that has only a main verb and no auxiliary is called a simple tense. A verb tense that is composed of a main verb and its auxiliary is called a compound tense.

Joe-Bob **écoute** de la musique country.

Joe-Bob listens to country music.

Joe-Bob **a écouté** de la musique

Joe-Bob has listened to country music.

country.

In the first example, the main verb 'écouter' is in the simple present tense. In the second example, the verb is in the compound past tense, a tense which combines the auxiliary verb 'avoir' with the past participle of 'écouter'.

Modals are special auxiliary verbs that express the attitude of the speaker. In short, modal verbs are 'moody verbs'. For example, modal verbs indicate subtle shades of meaning concerning such things as the likelihood of an event or the moral obligation of an event. The most frequent modal verbs in English are the following: should, could, may, might, ought to, must.



Note how the following modal verbs in French and English convey an attitude of increased urgency.

Tex **peut** quitter la France.

Tex can leave France.

Tex **devrait** quitter la France!

Tex should leave France!

Tex **doit** quitter la France!!

Tex must leave France!!

transitive vs. intransitive verbs

Transitive verbs require a direct object while intransitive verbs do not permit an object. A direct object is usually defined as the party which directly receives the action designated by the verb. The terms 'transitive' and 'intransitive' are derived from the grammatical term transitivity which refers to the transfer of an action from the subject (S) to the direct object (DO).

Transitive Tex (S) écrit un poème (DO).

Tex writes a poem.

Intransitive Tex (S) sort.

Tex goes out.

French vs. English verbs

There is one important difference between French and English verbs that often causes trouble for beginning language learners. There is a high frequency of English verbs which combine with a particle (typically a preposition) to express idiomatic meanings. English speakers can completely change the meaning of the verb by changing the particle. Consider the extremely versatile English verb 'to get'.

GET + particle	meaning	french equivalent
to get about	to move around	se déplacer
to get better	to recover	se remettre
to get out	to leave	sortir, descendre
to get up	to get out of bed	se lever

In order to convey the differences in meaning of the 'get + particle' constructions, note how French makes use of completely different verbs. As a consequence, when you translate such verbs from English into French, you must never translate word-for-word (i.e. translating the verb and particle separately). Since the verb and particle 'go together' in English, they must be translated as a unit in French.