

Vouloir, pouvoir and **devoir** are called modal verbs. When used with infinitives, they act as auxiliary verbs or semi-auxiliaries.

vouloir

Vouloir expresses a strong will or desire; in the present tense it has the same feeling as a command. It is an irregular verb in the present tense. Note how the present tense forms a "boot"; the stems (in this case the vowels) change only in the nous and vous forms.



vouloir 'to wish, want, will'	
je veux	nous voulons
tu veux	vous voulez
il/elle/on veut	ils/elles veulent
past participle: voulu	

Vouloir may be followed by an infinitive or a noun (**Je veux du calme**, I want some quiet. **Je veux dormir**, I want to sleep). This verb is also often paired with the adverb **bien** to express the meaning "to be willing" (**Je veux bien!**).

pouvoir

Pouvoir expresses the physical ability or permission to do something ie possibility. It is also an irregular verb with formation similar to vouloir. The "boot" formation is also evident.

pouvoir 'to be able, be permitted to'	
je peux	nous pouvons
tu peux	vous pouvez
il/elle/on peut	ils/elles peuvent
past participle: pu	

Pouvoir may be followed by an infinitive construction or may stand alone.

As in English, pouvoir is used to give or to ask permission translated by the English "may" (**Est-ce que je peux m'asseoir?**, May I sit down?)

It is important not to confuse the roles of pouvoir and savoir in French. Savoir expresses "to know how" whereas pouvoir expresses "to be able to."

devoir

Devoir expresses obligation, probability and supposition but if followed by a noun, expresses the idea "to owe". This verb is irregular in its present form. Once again, the "boot" formation is seen with this verb; the stem changes in the 1st and 2nd person plural conjugations.

devoir 'to have to, be supposed to/ to owe'	
je dois	nous devons

dois	devez
il/elle/ on doit	ils/elles doivent
past participle: dû	

Devoir may be followed by an infinitive or may stand alone to have the meaning "to have to" (**Je dois partir**, I must leave.) When followed by a noun, devoir means "to owe" (**Je dois 10 dollars**).

All three verbs are often found in the **conditional** in order to be more polite in requests and commands.



Tammy: Je **veux** faire du shopping. Tex, tu veux venir avec moi?

Tammy: I want to go shopping. Tex, do you want to come with me?

Bette: Mais Tex, tu ne **peux** pas. Tes étudiants **doivent** réviser pour l'examen de français.

Bette: But Tex, you can't. Your students have to study for the French exam.

Tex: Oui, c'est vrai. Tammy, est-ce que tu **peux** m'aider?

Tex: Yes, that's right. Tammy, can you help me?

Tammy: Mais Tex, je **dois** absolument acheter une nouvelle robe pour le week-end.

Tammy: But Tex, I absolutely must buy a new dress for the weekend.

Bette: Vas-y Tammy. Tex et moi, nous **pouvons** aider les étudiants ensemble.

Bette: Go ahead Tammy. Tex and I can help the students together!



exercices

fill in the blanks

Complete each sentence with the present indicative of either 'devoir', 'vouloir', or 'pouvoir'.

1. Tex _____ une cigarette.
2. Bette _____ sortir avec Tex.
3. Joe-Bob _____ beaucoup d'argent à la banque.
4. Edouard ne _____ pas courir très vite.
5. Les étudiants _____ comprendre le français de Tex.
6. Tex _____ écrire une carte postale aux nonnes ('nuns') de Lyon.
7. Corey et Fiona ne _____ pas vivre sous l'eau.
8. Corey _____ voler mais pas Fiona.
9. Nous _____ respecter les animaux.
10. Les amis _____ aller à la plage tous les week-ends.
11. Edouard: Eh, les copains! Qu'est-ce que vous _____ faire ce soir?
12. Tex n'est pas en classe aujourd'hui; il _____ être malade.