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French Grammar For Dummies

From [French Grammar For Dummies](#) by Veronique Mazet

French grammar is all about using French words in the correct way so people can understand your meaning. You can learn a lot of French words by browsing an English-French dictionary, but to make sense, you need to know the rules of French grammar. Some of the basics include making nouns plural, adding description by pairing adjectives correctly to nouns, and using pronominal verbs to talk about actions done to you or someone else.

Cheat Sheet

How to Make French Nouns Plural

Create plural nouns in French by adding an *s* or *x*, or by substituting *-aux* for *-al*. Making French nouns plural, however, takes a different tack when it comes to family names and nouns that end in *-s*, *-x*, or *-z*. In French grammar, here's how you turn a singular noun into a plural noun:

- For most nouns, you add **-s** to the end. For example: **résultat** (*result*) becomes **résultats** (*results*); **fleur** (*flower*) becomes **fleurs** (*flowers*).
- Nouns that end in **-au** take **-x** in the plural. For example: **bateau** (*boat*) becomes **bateaux** (*boats*), and **manteau** (*overcoat*) becomes **manteaux** (*overcoats*).
- Most nouns that end in **-ou** take **-s** in the plural, but some take **-x**. For example: **chou** (*cabbage*) becomes **choux** (*cabbages*), and **bijou** (*jewel*) becomes **bijoux** (*jewels*).
- Nouns that end in **-al** drop that ending and use **-aux** in the plural. For example: **journal** (*newspaper*) becomes **journaux** (*newspapers*); **animal** (*animal*) becomes **animaux** (*animals*).
- Nouns that end in **-s**, **-x**, or **-z** when they're singular don't change in the plural; you simply change the accompanying article. For example: **un Français** (*a Frenchman*) remains **des Français** (*Frenchmen*), and **un virus** (*a virus*) remains **des virus** (*viruses*).
- Family names aren't pluralized in French. For example, *the Martins* lose the **-s** in French but keep the article: **Les Martin**.

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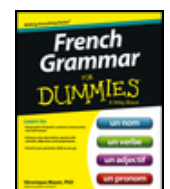
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Matching French Adjectives to the Nouns They Describe

In French grammar, adjectives have to reflect both the gender (masculine or feminine) and the number of the nouns (singular or plural) they modify. Have a look:

- **Gender:** All French nouns have a gender. If you want to describe a masculine noun, like **le vélo** (*the bicycle*), you need a masculine adjective to match, like **le vélo noir** (*the black bicycle*). But if a noun is feminine, like **la voiture** (*the car*), the adjective that accompanies the noun must be in its feminine form. For instance, to say *the black car*, you say **la voiture noire**. (Notice that the feminine version of **noir** has an **e** at the end.)
- **Number:** A French noun can be singular or plural, regardless of the gender, and the adjective must match that. For several *black bikes*, say **les vélos noirs**. To describe a group of *black cars*, say **les voitures noires**. (Notice that both adjectives have an **s** at the end.) And if you're talking about *the black cars and the black bikes* together, the adjective is masculine and plural: **les vélos et les voitures noirs**.

Following are some general rules on how to modify a masculine singular adjective to make it feminine singular:

- The most common way to make an adjective feminine is to add an **-e** to its masculine singular form (which is the default form of the adjective found in a French dictionary).
- Some masculine singular adjectives already end in **-e**. For those, don't add an extra **-e** to form the feminine singular; they remain as is. For instance, **aimable** (*nice*), **calme** (*calm*), and **utile** (*useful*) have the same form in masculine singular and feminine singular.
- For most adjectives that end in a vowel + a consonant, double that consonant before adding the **-e** of the feminine. For example: **bon** (*good*) becomes **bonne**; **gros** (*fat*) becomes **grosse**; **mignon** (*cute*) becomes **mignonne**.
- For most adjectives that end in **-eur** or **-eux**, replace the ending with **-euse** to form the feminine. For example: **amoureux** (*in love*) becomes **amoureuse**, **heureux** (*fat*) becomes **heureuse**, and **affreux** (*atrocious*) becomes **affreuse**.
- For adjectives that end in **-teur**, replace that ending with **-trice** to form the feminine. **Protecteur** (*protective*) becomes **protectrice**, **conservateur** (*conservative*) becomes **conservatrice**, and so on.
- For adjectives that end in **-er**, replace the ending with **-ère** to form the feminine, like **dernier** (*last*) to **dernière**, **premier** (*first*) to **première**, and **cher** (*expensive*) to **chère**.
- For most adjectives that end in **-et**, replace **-et** with **-ète** to form the feminine. For example, **discret** (*discreet*) becomes **discrète**, **complet** (*complete*) becomes **complète**, and **secret** (*secret*) becomes **secrète**.
- For adjectives that end in **-f**, replace **-f** with **-ve** to form the feminine, like **neuf** (*new*) becomes **neuve**, and **sportif** (*athletic*) becomes **sportive**.
- Adjectives of nationality that end in **-ain**, like **américain** (*American*) and **mexicain** (*Mexican*) don't double the **-n**. They just add the **-e**.
- Some adjectives have a completely irregular form that doesn't follow any

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pattern. Here are the most common ones:

Masculine Singular	Feminine Singular	English Translation
beau	belle	<i>handsome/beautiful</i>
blanc	blanche	<i>white</i>
faux	fausse	<i>untrue</i>
long	longue	<i>long</i>
nouveau	nouvelle	<i>new</i>
roux	rousse	<i>red-haired</i>
vieux	vieille	<i>old</i>

Here are some general rules on how to modify an adjective to make it plural:

- The regular way of marking the plural of an adjective is by adding an **-s** to the masculine form or the feminine form. For example, the masculine singular adjective **vert** (*green*) becomes **verts** in plural, and the feminine singular **verte** (*green*) becomes **vertes** in plural.
- If the adjective already ends in an **-s** or an **-x** in masculine singular, it doesn't take another **-s** to form the plural. It remains as is and has the same form in masculine singular and plural. A few adjectives of this type are **épais** (*thick*), **gris** (*gray*), and **curieux** (*curious*).
- For masculine singular adjectives that end in **-al**, drop the **-al** and replace it with **-aux** to form the plural. For example, **normal** (*normal*) becomes **normaux** in plural.
- Masculine singular adjectives that end in **-eau** add an **-x** instead of an **-s**. For instance, **beau** (*handsome*) becomes **beaux** in the plural, and **nouveau** (*new*) becomes **nouveaux**.
- The masculine singular adjective **tout** (*all*) becomes **tous** in the masculine plural.

Understanding French Pronominal Verbs

In French grammar, verbs called *pronominal verbs* use an extra pronoun. The extra pronouns are *reflexive*, meaning they typically reflect the subject of the verb, like *(to) oneself* does to a verb in English. The verbs fall into three categories:

- **Reflexive verbs:** Express an action done by the subject to itself, such as **Je me regarde** (*I look at myself*).
- **Reciprocal verbs:** Indicate that two subjects are doing something to one another, as in **Ils se parlent** (*They talk to each other*).
- **Idiomatic pronominal verbs:** The extra pronoun indicates neither *to oneself* nor *to one another*, like **tu te souviens** (*you remember*).

You can identify a pronominal verb by its infinitive; it always has the pronoun **se** right before the infinitive, like in **se préparer** (*to get oneself ready*). These verbs are otherwise conjugated as if they didn't have a reflexive pronoun. The only difference is that you also conjugate the added pronoun.

Here's how to match the reflexive pronouns to the subjects.

Subject	Reflexive Pronoun	English Translation
je	me (m' before a vowel or a mute -h)	<i>myself</i>
tu	te (t' before a vowel or a mute -h)	<i>yourself</i>
il/elle/on	se (s' before a vowel or a mute -h)	<i>himself/herself/oneself</i>
nous	nous	<i>ourselves</i>
vous	vous	<i>yourselves</i>
ils/elles	se (s' before a vowel or a mute -h)	<i>themselves</i>

To form the present tense of a pronominal verb, conjugate the verb in the present tense to match your subject; then change the reflexive pronoun to match the subject and place it immediately before the verb. Here's a present tense conjugation of **se laver** (*to wash oneself*) as an example:

- **je me lave** (*I wash*)
- **tu te laves** (*you [singular informal] wash*)
- **il/elle/on se lave** (*he/she/one washes*)
- **nous nous lavons** (*we wash*)
- **vous vous lavez** (*you [plural and singular formal] wash*)
- **ils/elles se lavent** (*they [masculine and feminine] wash*)

If a sentence has two verbs (one conjugated, the other in the infinitive), as in *I want to wash myself* or *I'm going to wash myself*, place the correct form of the reflexive pronoun before the infinitive like so: **Je vais me laver.**

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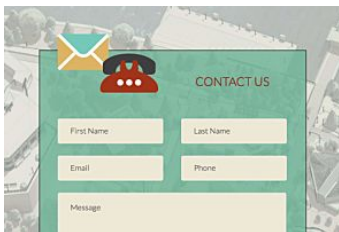
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