Introduction to French Grammar : What Type of Word is This ?

Understand the relation between the different words and their order in a sentence.

By comparing French and English and using examples in both languages, my intention is to make these basic grammar notions comprehensible by students of all levels in French (as an introduction or as a brush up). This has helped many of my students to get their first grip on French grammar and gain much confidence.

Basic grammar notions

Nouns

- Nouns are words in front of which you can put "a"/"the".
  Ex.: chair → a/the chair → "chair" is a noun
  Freedom → a/the freedom →"freedom" is a noun
  To eat → a/the to eat → "to eat" is not a noun

Do exercise 1

- Nouns need an article in front of them (in moooost cases)
- Nouns in French are either masculine or feminine. It's their gender.
- Nouns can be singular or plural. It's their number.
- There also are proper nouns. They always start with a capital letter and are names of specific people, places, etc. They often don't have an article.
  Ex: Jessica, Paris, la France, la Seine

Articles

- Articles are the small words you can find before a noun.
- Articles need to agree with the noun (in gender and number)
- There are 3 different types of articles:

Type	In English	In French
Indefinite articles → non specific *Ex: "un chat" = a cat (a random cat, a cat among others*	"a" (singular) (no plural form in English but it would be the equivalent of "some, a plural number of")	Un, une, des
Definite articles → specific, used to talk about something that we know:	The (no translation in English when	Le, la les

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• Because it's been mentioned before *Ex: "le chat" = the cat (the cat that we just taked about)* • Because there's only one *Ex: "le soleil" = the sun* • A general notion *Ex: "l'amour" (love), "la vie" (life), le football (soccer)*	referring to the general notion, ex. "l'amour"= love)	
Partitive articles • for what you cannot count *Ex: "du beurre" (some butter, a certain quantity of)* • for a portion, as opposed to a whole *Ex: "du poulet" (some chicken, a certain amout/a piece of it)*	"some, a certain quantity of" (sometimes not translated in English)	Du, de la, de l', des

I will also add to the "articles" category the following two groups, although they are not officially called articles, because they are used the same way as the "real" articles:

Type	*In English*	*In French*
Possessive adjectives (to say who the noun belong to)	My, your, his, her, our, their	Mon/ma/mes, ton/ta/tes, son/sa/ses, notre/nos, votre/vos, leur/leurs
Demonstrative adjectives (to point at something/someone)	This, that, these, those	Ce/cet, cette, ces

Adjectives and adverbs

Adjectives	*Adverbs*
• Describe a noun: Adjectives say how something/someone is *Ex:* *A <u>small</u> street* *An <u>intelligent</u> man* *A <u>white</u> rose* *A <u>scary</u> movie*	• Describe a verb/an adjective/another adverb: - Adverbs of manner give information about how sth is done (slowly, intelligently, thoroughly, etc) - Adverbs of degree give information about how much (beaucoup, très, trop, un peu, etc) - Adverbs of place/time give information about when or where (often, rarely, tomorrow, outside, etc) *Ex:* *The child speaks <u>well</u> (gives information*

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	about the verb, how he speaks)
	It's a <u>very</u> small street (gives information about the adjective small, how small it is)
• Adjectives need to agree with the nouns that they describe in gender and number.	• Adverbs are invariable, i.e their form never changes (there is no feminine or plural form)

Order:

➢ In English, anything that describes something/someone goes before it:

Ex1: a walk → a 5-minute walk, a relaxing walk

Ex2: a pencil → a sharp pencil, a blue pencil, a wooden pencil

➢ In French, anything that describes something generally comes after it:

Une promenade → une promenade de 5 minutes, une promenade relaxante

Un crayon → un crayon pointu, un crayon bleu, un crayon en bois

• Since adjectives and adverbs are used to describe, adjectives are generally placed after the noun in French and adverbs after the verbs (with exceptions).

Do exercise 3

Verbs

• Verbs indicate actions or states of being. (to walk, to go out, to become, to think, etc).
• You can conjugate verbs (in the present, past or future tenses).
• The non-conjugated form is called the **infinitive** (what I call "the untouched/raw form of the verb). It is the form that you will find in your dictionary.

Ex: Imagine that I am studying English. I read the following sentence: "He went to his office and finished his work".

Imagine that I don't understand the words "went", "office" and "finished".

I look them up in my dictionary. What is going to happen? I will be able to find the word "office", but I will find no entry for "went" or "finished". I would have to know that they are forms of "(to) go" and "(to) finish". "Go" and "finish" are infinitive forms. "Went" and "finished" are conjugated forms of these verbs.

Infinitive forms in English	*Infinitive forms in French*
It is the form that you can put "to" in front. Ex : He worked hard. → the action is TO WORK I was sick → the action is TO BE	In French, infinitives end in 3 different endings : ➢ -ER (manger, parler, chanter) ➢ -IR (finir, partir, venir) or • -RE (prendre, vendre, répondre)

Beware of literal translations! Each time you are making a sentence, systematically ask yourself first:

1) **Which verb to use? (=which action)**
2) **Which tense?**

For tips on how to conjugate the most common French tenses easily, click here.

Prepositions

- Prepositions are common small words that are quite tricky because it is not easy to translate them from one language to another.
- They are often used to describe a direction or a location (to, in, next to, behind, on, etc), or in front of a time/date (in August, at 2pm, from today, until tomorrow, etc).
- Some French prepositions : pour, de, à, avec, sur, sous, devant, à côté de, chez, sans, etc.
- Prepositions can be followed by

  ➢ a noun (sometimes with the article, sometimes without)
  > *Ex: Je vais chez Marie / Je vais chez mon amie*
  > *Je voudrais un café sans sucre.*
  > *J'apprends le français pour le plaisir.*

  ➢ A stress pronoun
  > *Ex : Je vais chez moi.*
  > *C'est pour elle/pour lui.*
  > *Il part avec toi.*

  ➢ A verb in the infinitive form
  > *Ex : J'apprends le français pour voyager et pour parler avec les natifs.*
  > *Il continue à fumer mais il essaie de faire du sport.*

Pronouns

- *Pro = for* (in French: "*pour*"). A pronoun is a small word that **replaces a noun (or a group of words) in order to avoid a repetition.** (It stands *for* a noun/a group of words.)
  *Ex1: Eva is hungry. Eva orders a pizza. → Eva is hungry. **She** orders a pizza.*
  *Ex2: We are going to the park. Meet us at the park ! → We are going to the park. Meet us **there** !*

*Ex3: Daniel loves <u>gardening and playing golf</u>. Rob doesn't like <u>gardening and playing golf</u>. → Daniel loves <u>gardening and playing golf</u>. Rob doesn't like **that**.*

*Ex4: I saw a <u>movie</u>. I liked watching this <u>movie</u>. → I saw a <u>movie</u>. I liked watching **it**.*

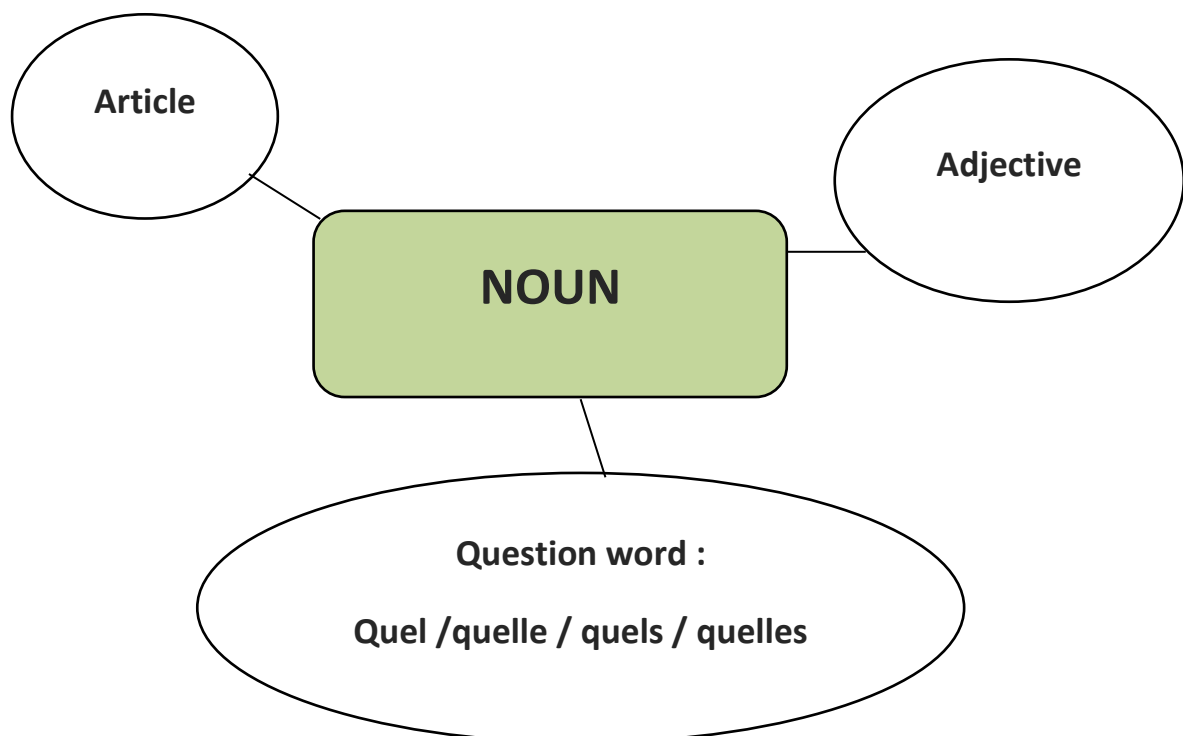- In French, pronouns are placed **in front of the verb they refer to**.
  *Ex1: J'aime les chats → Je <u>les</u> **aime**.*
  *Ex2 : J'aime regarder les étoiles → J'aime <u>les</u> **regarder**.*

Do exercise 6

Remember this !

Because **the noun is the most important word of a group of word, everything that gravitates around it needs to agree with it/to match it (in gender and number).**
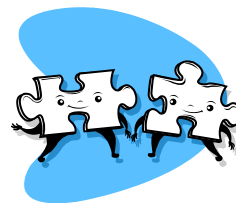

Example

" Maison ": (="house") This noun is feminine in French.

You can add one or several adjectives to describe the house in more details. Let's say that you want to say that it is BLUE.

The word/adjective for "blue" in French is "bleu" (for the masculine form) and "bleue" for the feminine (it's very common to form the feminine version of a word by adding a final "_e").

Think of it as a jigsaw puzzle:

To say "a blue house", you need to "clip" a feminine singular article to the noun "maison", and to also clip the feminine singular form of the adjective blue. It all needs to be consistant with the gender and number of the noun ("maison").

Une maison bleu = incorrect : the adjective describing the house (it is blue) is spelt with the masculine form. The correct form is the feminie singular, bleue

➔ " une maison bleue" is the correct form.

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Exercises

Nouns

> ### Exercise 1
Which of the following are nouns?

Wood, pity, sorry, import, especially, after, broadcast

Articles

> ### Exercise 2
Translate. (Beginner level: try to identify what type of article is needed).

A man →	The departure→
The hotel →	His family→
Our holidays→	Some money→
Books →	Freedom→
Some bread→	This man→

Adjectives and adverbs

> ### Exercise 3
>   a. *Underline all the adjectives and draw an arrow pointing to the nouns they describe.*
>   b. *Circle all the adverbs and draw an arrow pointing to what they describe.*

The busy mum came back late from work. Her children were very hungry. She quickly started

to prepare a good dinner for them. Everyone talked a lot about their day. Then they watched

an entertaining program on TV.

Verbs

> ### Exercise 4
Find and write 3 French verbs for each category: (Beginner level: use a dictionary)

3 –ER verbs :

3 –IR verbs :

3 –RE verbs :

➢ Exercise 5

Fill in the table as much as you can according to your level of French. (Beginner level: try to fill at least the first column, using a dictionary if needed, and write "past/present/future" in the next column.)

	Which verb ?	Which tense ?	Translation in French
I am working hard.	*To work* *= travailler*	*Present* *(Indicative present)*	*Je **travaille** dur.*
The baby is crying.			
Do you speak English?			*(use the "vous" form)*
Mary and Kate will be at the party tomorrow.			
Sorry, I was sick.			
When did they go to France?			
My husband was driving when a dog crossed the street.			

Pronouns

➢ Exercise 6

a. *Underline the pronouns in the following sentences and say what they refer to / what they replace.*

b. *If you have already learnt about the different French pronouns, try to translate the sentences in French. Indicate what type of pronoun you are using (direct, indirect, place, stress, etc)*

Claire and her boyfriend called. They wanted to invite me to go to the cinema with them. I told them yes and we went there at 8pm. The movie was a love story. I liked it.

Answers

Nouns

> ### Exercise 1

Wood, pity, import, broadcast

Articles

> ### Exercise 2

A man → un homme (indefinite article)	The departure→ le depart (definite article)
The hotel → l'hôtel (definite article)	Her family→ sa famille (possessive adjective)
Our holidays→ nos vacances (possessive adjective)	Some money→ de l'argent (partitive article)
Books → des livres (indefinite article)	Freedom→ la liberté (definite article)
Some bread→ du pain (partitive article)	This man→ cet homme (demonstrative adjective)

Adjectives and adverbs

> ### Exercise 3

The busy mum came back late from work. Her children were very hungry. She quickly started

to prepare a good dinner for them. Everyone talked a lot about their day. Then they watched

an entertaining program on TV.

Verbs

> ### Exercise 4

–ER verbs : manger, parler, danser, protester, pédaler, commencer, arriver, discuter, etc.

–IR verbs : vomir, partir, sortir, finir, voir, grandir, courir, dormir, obtenir, etc.

–RE verbs : vendre, descendre, promettre, apprendre, suivre, défendre, entendre, etc.

> ### Exercise 5

	Which verb ?	Which tense ?	Translation in French
I am working hard.	To work	Present	Je **travaille** dur.

	= travailler	(Indicative present)	
The baby is crying.	To cry = pleurer	Present (Indicative present)	Le bébé **pleure**.
Do you speak English?	To speak = parler	Present (Indicative present)	*(use the "vous" form)* Vous **parlez** anglais?
Mary and Kate will be at the party tomorrow.	To be = être	Future (indicative future simple)	Mary et Kate **seront** à la fête demain.
Sorry, I was sick.	To be = être	Past (indicative imparfait)	Désolé, j'**étais** malade.
When did they go to France?	To go = aller	Past (indicative perfect: "passé composé »)	Quand est-ce qu'ils **sont allés** en France ?
My husband was driving when a dog crossed the street.	To drive = conduire & To cross = traverser	Past (indicative imparfait) & (indicative perfect: "passé composé »)	Mon mari **conduisait** quand un chien **a traversé** la rue.

Pronouns

➤ Underline Exercise 6

Claire and her boyfriend called. They[1] wanted to invite me[2] to the cinema with them[3]. I told them[4] yes and we[5] went there[6] at 8pm. The movie was a love story. I liked it[7].

Translation: Claire et son petit ami ont appelé. Ils[8] voulaient m[9]'inviter au cinéma avec eux[10]. Je leur[11] ai dit oui et nous[12] y[13] sommes allés à 20 heures. Le film était une histoire d'amour. Je l[14]'ai aimé.

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[1] They = Claire and her boyfriend
[2] Me = myself, I (Jessica)
[3] Them = Claire and her boyfriend
[4] Them = Claire and her boyfriend
[5] We = Claire, her boyfriend and myself
[6] There = to the cinema
[7] It = the movie
[8] Ils = subject pronoun
[9] Me/m' = direct object pronoun
[10] Eux = stress pronoun (after a preposition)
[11] Leur= indirect object pronoun
[12] Nous= subject pronoun
[13] Y = place pronoun
[14] Le/l' = direct object pronoun

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