

Reading headlines and short news reports

French A2 (elementary) · Lesson

Quick answer: French headlines are short: they drop articles and use the present tense for past events, as in *Le maire démissionne*. The article itself tells the story in the *passé composé*: *Les pompiers sont arrivés, Personne n'a été blessé*. Learn the *faits divers* vocabulary and look for *qui*, *quoi*, *où* and *quand*.

Level: French A2 (CEFR elementary) · **Standards:** CEFR A2, Reading

How is a headline different from a normal sentence?

A French headline is short. It often drops the article and the verb, and when it does use a verb, it uses the present tense even for a past event. The article underneath gives the details in the *passé composé*.

Headline	Full sentence	Meaning
Incendie à Rouen	Un incendie a éclaté à Rouen.	A fire broke out in Rouen.
Le maire de Nantes démissionne	Le maire de Nantes a démissionné.	The mayor of Nantes resigned.
Un chien retrouvé après deux jours	On a retrouvé un chien après deux jours.	A dog found after two days.

LA GAZETTE DU PORT

Incendie à Rouen :
trois blessés légers

le titre
(en gros)

Les pompiers sont arrivés en dix minutes. Le feu a détruit un garage hier soir, vers 22 h.

l'article
(le texte)

Samedi 14 — 1,50 €

A newspaper front page with its parts.

Rule: the *passé composé* in the news

Most verbs use {avoir} + past participle: {Les pompiers ont éteint le feu.} A few verbs of

movement or change use {être}, and the participle agrees with the subject: {Deux touristes sont tombées.} The negative surrounds the auxiliary: {Personne n'a été blessé.}

Verb	Passé composé	Meaning
arriver	elle est arrivée	she arrived
partir	ils sont partis	they left
tomber	il est tombé	he fell
voler	on a volé	someone stole
trouver	ils ont trouvé	they found

Watch out

{Blessé} means injured, not “blessed”. {Actuellement} means “currently”, not “actually”. And {une information} (singular) is a piece of news; {les informations} (plural) is the news broadcast.

Which words do you need for a fait divers?

A fait divers is a short report about an accident, a theft, a fire or an odd event. Regional papers print them every day.

French	English
un incendie	fire
un accident	accident
un vol	theft
un blessé	injured person
les pompiers	firefighters
la police	police
un témoin	witness
une grève	strike

Example: a short fait divers

{Hier soir, un feu a détruit un garage à Fort-de-France. Les pompiers sont arrivés en dix minutes. Personne n'a été blessé.}

Yesterday evening, a fire destroyed a garage in Fort-de-France. The firefighters arrived within ten minutes. Nobody was injured.

How do you read a news item quickly?

Look for the five questions below. Time words such as hier, ce matin, samedi dernier and selon la police (according to the police) signal the past and the source.



The five questions of a news item.

Culture note

French newspapers are sold at the {kiosque} and in many local shops. Regional dailies cover local news, sports and faits divers, while national papers focus on politics and the economy.

Zoé's tip

Read the headline, then jump to the first sentence of the article. Underline the verbs in the passé composé and ask {Qui ? Quoi ? Où ? Quand ?} Four answers are often enough to understand a story.

Key points to remember

- Headlines often omit the verb or use the present tense for a past event.
- News articles mostly use the passé composé for completed events.
- Verbs like arriver, partir and tomber use être, and the participle agrees with the subject.
- A fait divers is a short report on an accident, theft, fire or odd event.

Reading Headlines and Short News Reports: frequently asked questions

Why do French headlines use the present tense for past events?

It makes the news feel immediate and saves space. Le maire démissionne means the mayor has just resigned. The article then uses the passé composé: Le maire a démissionné.

What is a fait divers?

A fait divers is a short news item about a minor event such as an accident, a theft, a fire or a

rescue. Regional newspapers publish many of them every day.

Which auxiliary do you use in news reports?

Most verbs use avoir: La police a arrêté deux hommes. Verbs such as arriver, partir, tomber and rester use être: Les secours sont arrivés.

How do you say "nobody was injured" in French?

Say Personne n'a été blessé. or Il n'y a aucun blessé. Both are very common at the end of a fait divers.

What does selon la police mean?

It means "according to the police". Selon + source tells the reader where the information comes from. It is common in news items.