

Returning goods and complaining politely

French A2 (elementary) · Lesson

Quick answer: To return an item in French, name the problem (ça ne marche pas, il manque une vis), then make a soft request with the conditional: je voudrais échanger ce pull, pourriez-vous me rembourser ? The conditional keeps your tone polite without sounding timid.

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

How do you explain what is wrong with an item?

In a shop, the scene is always the same: you name the object, say what is wrong, then make a request. Start with the problem.

French	English
échanger ... contre ...	to exchange ... for ...
rembourser, un remboursement	to refund, a refund
un avoir	store credit note
un ticket de caisse, un reçu	receipt
la garantie	warranty
défectueux / cassé / en panne	faulty / broken / out of order
il manque ...	... is missing
le service client	customer service

Describing the problem

- Le grille-pain ne marche pas. — The toaster doesn't work.
- Le chargeur ne fonctionne plus. — The charger no longer works.
- Il manque une vis. — A screw is missing.
- Cette veste est trop petite pour moi. — This jacket is too small for me.

Maison Lumière
Ticket de caisse

Date : 12/05

Bouilloire 34,90 €

Total 34,90 €

Échange possible
jusqu'au 26/05

Keep the receipt: it shows the date and the deadline.

How do you ask politely for an exchange or a refund?

The polite conditional

Build the conditional from the future stem plus the endings **-ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient**. For requests, four forms matter most: je voudrais, j'aimerais, pourriez-vous and ce serait possible de.

Pronoun	pouvoir	vouloir
je	pourrais	voudrais
tu	pourrais	voudrais
il / elle	pourrait	voudrait
nous	pourrions	voudrions
vous	pourriez	voudriez
ils / elles	pourraient	voudraient

Pourriez-vous me rembourser ?

très poli

Je voudrais un remboursement.

poli

Je veux un remboursement.

direct

Remboursez-moi !

trop sec

Climb the ladder: the conditional makes a request softer.

Requests that work in any shop

- Je voudrais échanger ce pull contre une taille M. — I'd like to exchange this sweater for a size M.
- Pourriez-vous me rembourser ? — Could you refund me?
- Ce serait possible de voir le responsable ? — Would it be possible to see the manager?
- Auriez-vous ce modèle en noir ? — Would you have this model in black?

Common mistake

English speakers say *it doesn't work* and translate word for word: not Ça ne travaille pas but Ça ne marche pas. Also, rembourser mon pull would mean paying the sweater back. Say Je voudrais me faire rembourser or Je voudrais un remboursement.

Culture note

For online orders, European law gives you 14 days to cancel. In a shop, exchanging an item that is not faulty is the store's choice, so a receipt and a friendly tone matter. Often you get un avoir instead of cash.

Zoé's tip

Say Excusez-moi first, then the problem, then the request. Soften every request with je voudrais or pourriez-vous, and finish with s'il vous plaît. A smile does the rest.

Key points to remember

- Ça ne marche pas means it doesn't work; do not say ça ne travaille pas.
- Échanger ... contre ... means to exchange something for something else.
- Conditional = future stem + -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient.
- Je voudrais and pourriez-vous are the two safest request forms.
- Un avoir is a store credit note, not cash.

Returning Goods and Complaining Politely: frequently asked questions

How do I say that something doesn't work?

Say Ça ne marche pas or Ça ne fonctionne pas. For a machine that stopped, you can also say Il est en panne.

What is the difference between je veux and je voudrais?

Je veux is direct and can sound abrupt. Je voudrais is the conditional and the normal polite way to ask for something in a shop.

How do I form the conditional?

Take the future stem (voudr-, pourr-, aimer-) and add -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient. The stem is the same as in the futur simple.

How do I ask for a refund in French?

Say Je voudrais un remboursement, s'il vous plaît or Pourriez-vous me rembourser ? Show your receipt, un ticket de caisse, if you have it.

What is un avoir?

Un avoir is a credit note. The shop gives you an amount to spend later instead of returning cash.