

Schools, bac and universities in France

French B1 (intermediate) · Lesson

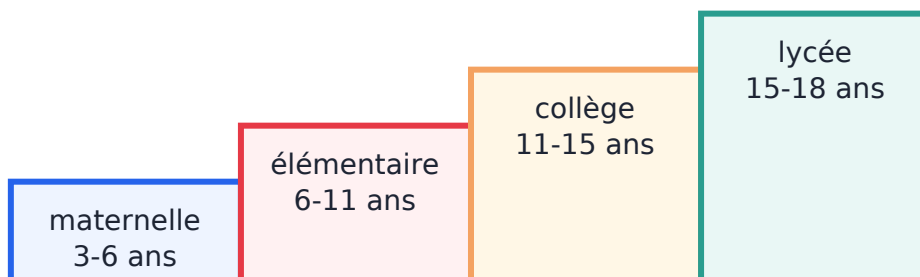
Quick answer: The French education system runs from l'école maternelle (age 3) through l'école élémentaire, le collège and le lycée, and ends with the baccalauréat. Then students choose the university or a selective grande école. Schooling is compulsory from 3 to 16, and the classes count down from sixième to troisième.

Level: French B1 (CEFR intermediate) · **Standards:** CEFR B1, Reading

How is school organized in France?

Schooling is compulsory from age 3 to age 16, and every stage has its own name. The classes count *down*: pupils enter the collège in sixième and leave it in troisième.

Stage	Age	Classes
l'école maternelle	3-6	petite, moyenne, grande section
l'école élémentaire	6-11	CP, CE1, CE2, CM1, CM2
le collège	11-15	sixième, cinquième, quatrième, troisième
le lycée	15-18	seconde, première, terminale



The four stages of French schooling, from maternelle to lycée.

Comparing two school systems

Use a contrast word to link what happens in France and abroad:

- contrairement à + noun: Contrairement à l'Australie, la rentrée a lieu en septembre.
- alors que / tandis que + clause: Alors que les élèves américains choisissent leurs cours, les Français suivent un programme commun au collège.
- par rapport à + noun: Par rapport à chez nous, l'année est plus courte.

What is the baccalauréat?

The baccalauréat (or le bac) is the national exam at the end of the lycée. There are three kinds: général, technologique and professionnel. The final mark is out of 20, and 10 is the pass mark. Candidates who score 12, 14 or 16 earn a mention (assez bien, bien, très bien). Before that, at the end of the collège, pupils sit the brevet.

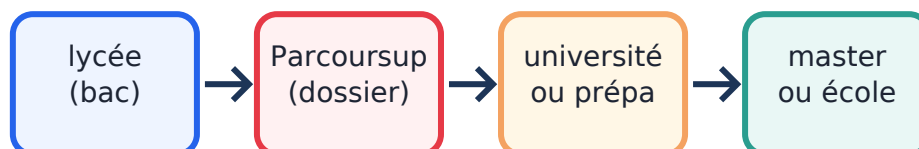
In context

Awa a réussi son bac avec mention bien. — Awa passed her bac with honors.

Mon frère a redoublé sa seconde. — My brother repeated tenth grade.

What can you do after the bac?

Applications go through an online platform called Parcoursup. Then there are two main roads. At the université, studies follow three levels: the licence (3 years), the master (2 more) and the doctorat (3 more). The grandes écoles (engineering, business, political science) are very selective: many students first spend two years in classes préparatoires, then take a competitive exam, the concours.



From the bac to higher education.

Watch out

English *college* does not mean collège, which is a middle school for ages 11 to 15. Also, passer un examen means to *take* an exam, not to pass it: use réussir un examen or être reçu. Finally, an élève goes to school, but an étudiant studies at a university.

Culture

Public universities in France charge only modest registration fees set by the state, and a mark of 16 out of 20 is considered excellent: teachers rarely give 20.

Zoé's tip

To describe your own country, start with Chez nous and finish with a contrast: Chez nous, ... alors qu'en France, ... One sentence like this is already B1.

Key points to remember

- Compulsory schooling lasts from age 3 to age 16.
- Four stages: maternelle, élémentaire, collège, lycée.
- The bac is marked out of 20; 10 is the pass mark.
- Universities follow licence, master, doctorat; grandes écoles recruit by concours.
- Réussir un examen means to pass; passer un examen means to take it.

Schools, Bac and Universities in France: frequently asked questions

At what age do children start school in France?

Children start l'école maternelle at age 3, and attendance is compulsory from that age until 16. Most keep studying until 18.

What is the difference between a collège and a lycée?

The collège covers ages 11 to 15 and ends with the brevet. The lycée covers ages 15 to 18 and leads to the bac.

What are the three kinds of bac?

The bac général, the bac technologique and the bac professionnel. Each prepares for different studies or for work.

What is a grande école?

A grande école is a selective higher-education school, for example in engineering or business. Admission usually depends on a competitive exam, often after two years of classes préparatoires.

How do you compare the French system with another one in French?

Use contrast words such as contrairement à, alors que, tandis que and par rapport à. They let you link two facts in one sentence.