

Etiquette, greetings and meals in France

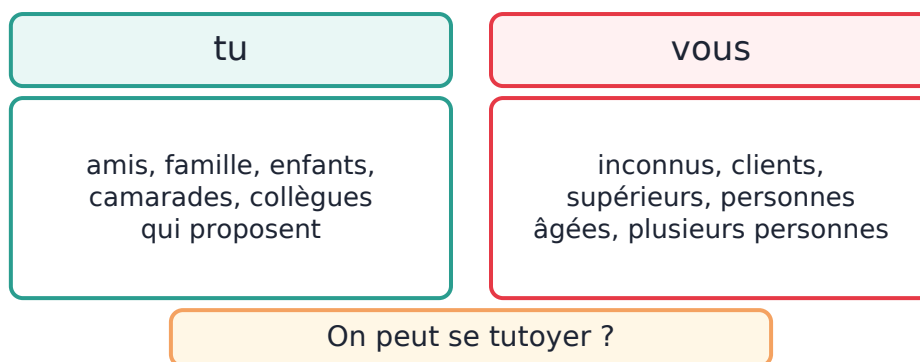
French B1 (intermediate) · Lesson

Quick answer: In France, use *vous* with strangers, clients and superiors, and *tu* with friends, family and peers, switching only when invited with *On peut se tutoyer ?*. Greet friends with *la bise* (the number of kisses varies by region), shake hands at work, and say *Bon appétit* before eating. Describe customs with *il faut* and *il vaut mieux*.

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

How do you choose between *tu* and *vous*?

French has two ways to say “you”. **Tu** is for people you are close to, **vous** for strangers, clients, older people and anyone you address as a group. Using the wrong one is rarely a disaster, but starting with *vous* is always the safe choice.



Tu or vous: who gets which pronoun

To move from one to the other, someone says *On peut se tutoyer ?* or *Vous pouvez me tutoyer*. The verbs *tutoyer* and *vouvoyer* belong to the *-oyer* family: *y* becomes *i* before a silent ending.

Subject	tutoyer	vouvoyer
je	tutoie	vouvoie
tu	tutoies	vouvoies
il / elle / on	tutoie	vouvoie
nous	tutoyons	vouvoyons
vous	tutoyez	vouvoyez
ils / elles	tutoient	vouvoient

How does la bise work?

La bise is a light kiss on the cheek, or the sound of one, used to greet friends, family and often colleagues who know each other well. The number of kisses, from one to four, depends on the region, so watch what others do. With a stranger or a client, shake hands instead: serrer la main.

What are the usual meal times?



Typical meal times

Lunch is the main break of the day, often an hour long. Dinner invitations usually start at 20 h, with an apéritif first. Say Bon appétit before starting, and wait for the host to begin.

How do you state rules and ask politely?

To describe a custom, use impersonal expressions followed by the infinitive. For a request, use the conditional of politeness.

Expression	Meaning	Example
il faut + inf.	one must	Il faut dire bonjour en entrant.
il ne faut pas + inf.	one must not	Il ne faut pas couper la parole.
il vaut mieux + inf.	it is better to	Il vaut mieux arriver à l'heure.
je voudrais	I would like	Je voudrais un verre d'eau.
pourriez-vous + inf.	could you	Pourriez-vous répéter ?

Common mistake

Il ne faut pas means “you must not”, never “you don't have to”. For the second idea say Ce n'est pas obligatoire or Il n'est pas nécessaire de.... Mixing them up can make you sound very rude!

At the office

- Bonjour à tous ! — said when you enter, to everyone.

- Cordialement — formal email ending; À bientôt or Bises — friends.
- Chez nous, on déjeune à midi trente. — Where I come from, we eat lunch at 12:30.

Culture note

When invited to dinner, guests often bring flowers, a dessert or a bottle of wine. Chrysanthemums are linked to funerals, so avoid them as a gift.

Zoé's tip

Start with vous, smile, and wait. If the other person says On se tutoie ?, you have just earned a new friend!

Key points to remember

- Start with vous; the other person usually proposes the switch to tu.
- Tutoyer and vouvoyer are -oyer verbs: je tutoie, nous tutoyons.
- La bise varies from one to four kisses depending on the region.
- Il faut means one must; il ne faut pas means one must not.
- Use je voudrais and pourriez-vous to make polite requests.

Etiquette, greetings and meals in France: frequently asked questions

When should I use tu and when vous in France?

Use vous with people you do not know, clients, older people and your boss, and tu with friends, family, children and classmates. If unsure, begin with vous. Many workplaces switch to tu quickly, especially in younger teams.

How many kisses are there in la bise?

There is no national rule: it can be one, two, three or four, depending on the region and the group. Follow the person who greets you. At work, a handshake is often more appropriate for a first meeting.

What time do French people eat?

Lunch is usually between 12 h and 14 h, dinner between 19 h 30 and 21 h. Many restaurants serve only during these windows and close in between, so check the opening hours before going.

How do I politely ask to switch to tu?

Say On peut se tutoyer ? or Si tu veux, on peut se tutoyer. In a hierarchy, it is generally the senior

person who proposes the switch, and you answer Avec plaisir.

What does il ne faut pas mean?

It means “one must not”: Il ne faut pas fumer ici is a prohibition. To say “you don't have to”, use Ce n'est pas obligatoire or Tu n'es pas obligé de venir. The two ideas are different in French.