

Subjunctive after superlatives and in relative clauses

French B2 (upper intermediate) · Lesson

Quick answer: At B2 the French subjunctive appears after a superlative (le plus, le seul, le premier) when the speaker gives an opinion, in relative clauses about someone or something sought, doubtful or denied, and in sentences that open with que, such as *Qu'il pleuve ou non, nous sortons*.

Level: French B2 (CEFR upper intermediate) · **Standards:** CEFR B2, Writing

When does a superlative call for the subjunctive?

After a superlative or a word of limit, French uses the subjunctive when the speaker gives a personal judgment, not a measurable fact. The triggers are le plus, le moins, le meilleur, le seul, l'unique, le premier and le dernier. The verb in the relative clause then goes into the subjunctive, often the past subjunctive.

Trigger	Example
le plus beau	C'est la plus belle ville que je connaisse. — It is the most beautiful city I know.
le meilleur	C'est le meilleur film que j'aie vu cette année. — It is the best film I have seen this year.
le seul, l'unique	Elle est la seule collègue qui puisse m'aider. — She is the only colleague who can help me.
le premier, le dernier	Il est le dernier élève qui soit arrivé. — He is the last student who has arrived.

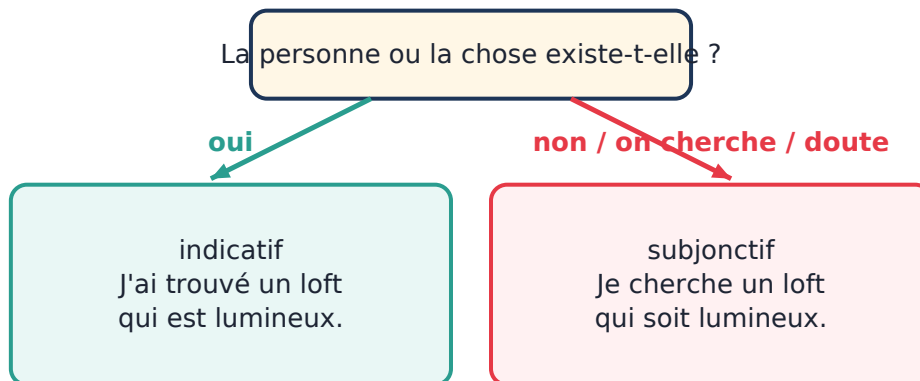
Rule: superlative and subjunctive

When the idea is *as far as I know* or *in my opinion*, use the subjunctive. When you simply state a verified fact, the indicative is possible: *C'est le seul candidat qui a répondu*. At B2, writers favor the subjunctive after a superlative.

Past subjunctive: subjunctive of avoir or être + past participle: *que j'aie vu*, *qu'elle soit partie*. The participle agrees as usual: *la plus belle surprise que j'aie reçue*.

When does a relative clause take the subjunctive?

Use the subjunctive when the person or thing is only wanted, hypothetical, doubtful or denied.
Use the indicative when it exists and you know it.



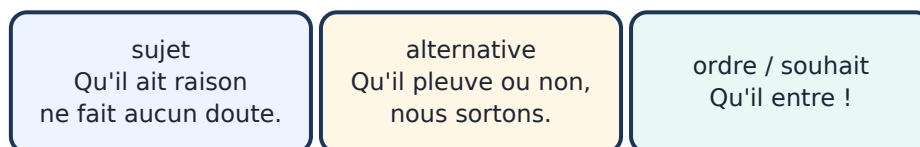
A decision chart that chooses the mood in a relative clause.

Examples

- Nous cherchons un logement qui soit près du métro. — We are looking for a place that is near the metro.
- Y a-t-il quelqu'un qui sache réparer une imprimante ? — Is there anyone who knows how to fix a printer?
- Je ne connais personne qui ait visité la Guadeloupe. — I know nobody who has visited Guadeloupe.
- J'ai trouvé un logement qui est près du métro. — I found a place that is near the metro.

What does que + subjunctive do at the start of a sentence?

A sentence can open with que and no main verb before it. The verb is in the subjunctive. This pattern builds a subject clause, an alternative or a third-person command.



Every time: que + subjonctif au début de la phrase.

Il n'y a pas de verbe principal avant que.

Three uses of an opening que clause with the subjunctive.

Examples

- Qu'elle ait menti ne surprend personne. — That she lied surprises nobody.
- Qu'il pleuve ou qu'il neige, le marché de Noël a lieu. — Rain or snow, the Christmas market goes ahead.
- Que la fête commence ! — Let the party begin!

Watch out

English speakers keep the indicative after *the best ... I have ever seen* and write *le meilleur que j'ai vu*. In careful French write *que j'aie vu*. Also, *Que tu viens ou non* is wrong: it must be *Que tu viennes ou non*.

Culture note

Qu'ils mangent de la brioche ! is a famous sentence often attributed to Marie-Antoinette, but there is no evidence that she ever said it. It remains the most quoted example of an opening *que* command.

Zoé's tip

Superlatives and searches talk about what you think or hope, not what is proven. If you hesitate between moods, ask: do I know this thing exists? If the answer is no, use the subjunctive.

Key points to remember

- After *le plus*, *le meilleur*, *le seul*, *le premier* and *le dernier*, the relative clause usually takes the subjunctive.
- A relative clause about something sought, doubtful or denied takes the subjunctive; about something found, the indicative.
- After *personne*, *rien*, *aucun* and in questions about existence, use the subjunctive.
- An opening *que* clause is always subjunctive: *Qu'il entre !*
- Past subjunctive = subjunctive of *avoir* or *être* + participle: *que j'aie vu*.

Subjunctive after superlatives and in relative clauses: frequently asked questions

Why does a superlative take the subjunctive in French?

The speaker gives a personal judgment about the whole group, not a proven fact. The subjunctive signals this opinion: *c'est le meilleur film que j'aie vu*.

What is the difference between je cherche un guide qui sait and qui sache?

Qui sait suggests that you already have a particular guide in mind. Qui sache means any guide with this skill, who may not exist yet.

What does que at the start of a sentence mean?

It can open a subject clause, an alternative such as qu'il pleuve ou non, or a third-person command such as qu'il entre. The verb is always in the subjunctive.

How is the past subjunctive formed?

Use the subjunctive of avoir or être and add the past participle. The participle agrees as in the passé composé: la surprise que j'aie reçue.

Does le seul always take the subjunctive?

Usually, when the clause expresses a judgment or limit. If you only report a verified fact, the indicative is also heard, but B2 writing prefers the subjunctive.