

# Le, la, un, une: gender and school supplies

## French 1 (high school) · Lesson

**Quick answer:** Every French noun is masculine or feminine, and its article shows which: le, un for masculine; la, une for feminine; les, des for plurals; l' before a vowel sound. Gender is mostly arbitrary, so learn each noun with its article. Some endings help: -tion and -té are usually feminine, -age and -ment usually masculine.

**Level:** French 1 (high school, ACTFL Novice) · **Standards:** ACTFL Novice Mid, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational

## Why do French nouns have a gender?

In French, every noun is either masculine or feminine, even a ruler or a notebook. The gender has nothing to do with the object itself: a pencil case is feminine and a backpack is masculine, and that is simply how the language developed. The article in front of the noun reveals the gender, so French speakers learn un stylo and une gomme as a unit.

## Which article means the?

| Masculine | Feminine | Before a vowel        | Plural      |
|-----------|----------|-----------------------|-------------|
| le stylo  | la gomme | l'école, l'ordinateur | les crayons |

### The, a and some

The definite articles are le, la, l' and les. The indefinite articles are un (masculine), une (feminine) and des (plural, both genders). Le and la both become l' before a vowel or a silent h, which hides the gender, so check a dictionary: l'agenda is masculine and l'école is feminine.



Choosing between les, l', le and la.

## What school supplies should you know?

| Masculine               | Feminine                      |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| un stylo — pen          | une gomme — eraser            |
| un cahier — notebook    | une règle — ruler             |
| un sac à dos — backpack | une trousse — pencil case     |
| un crayon — pencil      | une calculatrice — calculator |

Some nouns are always plural in French, like des ciseaux (scissors).

### In a sentence

- J'ai une trousse et des stylos. — I have a pencil case and some pens.
- Le cahier de Lola est sur le bureau. — Lola's notebook is on the desk.

## Can endings reveal the gender?

### Often feminine (la)

- tion : la récréation
- té : la liberté
- trice : la calculatrice

### Often masculine (le)

- age : le voyage
- ment : le moment
- eau : le bureau

*Ending clues, with famous exceptions such as la page and l'eau.*

Endings give a good hint, not a guarantee. Feminine words often end in -tion, -té and -ure, while masculine words often end in -age, -ment and -eau. The final letter -e alone proves nothing: le livre is masculine.

### Common mistake

English speakers drop the article, as in “I have pens”. French needs it: J'ai des stylos. Another mistake is keeping le or la before a vowel, as in le école; write l'école.

### La rentrée and big squares

In early September, French families shop for the school list called les fournitures scolaires. Many notebooks use grands carreaux, a ruled pattern of large squares that teaches children to write letters at the same height.

**Zoé's tip**

Learn every noun with its article: write un stylo, not just stylo. Color the masculine ones blue and the feminine ones red in your vocabulary list.

**Key points to remember**

- The definite articles are le, la, l' and les, meaning the.
- The indefinite articles are un, une and des, meaning a, an or some.
- L' replaces le or la before a vowel or a silent h: l'école, l'ordinateur.
- Des is the plural of both un and une, and it is required in French where English says nothing.
- Endings -tion, -té and -ure are usually feminine; -age, -ment and -eau usually masculine.

## Le, La, Un, Une: Gender and School Supplies: frequently asked questions

**How do I know if a French noun is masculine or feminine?**

Look at the article in a dictionary. Some endings help, such as -tion and -té for feminine and -age and -ment for masculine. Always learn the noun together with its article.

**When do I use l' instead of le or la?**

Use l' before a vowel sound or a silent h in a singular noun, as in l'école or l'homme. The l' form hides the gender, so you must memorize it.

**What is the difference between le and un?**

Le is definite and means the, for something specific. Un is indefinite and means a or one, for something not yet identified. Le stylo is the pen already known; un stylo is any pen.

**What does des mean?**

Des is the plural of un and une, and it means some. French uses it where English says nothing, so J'ai des stylos is simply I have pens.

**Are there exceptions to the ending rules?**

Yes. La page and l'image are feminine despite -age, and le silence is masculine although it ends in -e. Treat the rules as clues and check each new word.