

Who is who: pronouns, être, nationalities and jobs

French 1 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: French has nine subject pronouns: je, tu, il, elle, on, nous, vous, ils, elles. The verb être (to be) is irregular: je suis, tu es, il est, nous sommes, vous êtes, ils sont. In everyday speech on means we. After être, names of jobs and nationalities take no article: Elle est infirmière.

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

What are the subject pronouns in French?

A subject pronoun replaces the person or people who do the action. French has two words for “you” and a very useful word, on, for “we”.

Singular	Plural
je — I	nous — we
tu — you (informal)	vous — you (formal or plural)
il — he / it	ils — they (boys, or mixed)
elle — she / it	elles — they (girls only)
on — we, one, people in general	

1 person

je · tu
il · elle
on (= nous)

2 or more

nous
vous
ils · elles

One person on the left, a group on the right.

Notice that il and elle also mean “it” for objects: Le bus est en retard ? Oui, il est en retard. The pronoun follows the grammatical gender of the noun, not the meaning of the sentence.

How do you conjugate être?

Être, to be (irregular)

Pronoun	Form	Example
je	suis	Je suis élève.
tu	es	Tu es américain.
il / elle / on	est	On est amis.
nous	sommes	Nous sommes en classe.
vous	êtes	Vous êtes belges.
ils / elles	sont	Elles sont à Lausanne.

On means we

On est en retard ! — We're late! The verb after on is always the singular est, even though the meaning is plural.

How do you say where you are from and what you do?

Nationalities and jobs follow être directly, without un or une. Adjectives of nationality agree with the person: add -e for a girl, and -s for several people.

Masculine	Feminine	Job (m / f)
français	française	boulangier / boulangère
canadien	canadienne	infirmier / infirmière
sénégalais	sénégalaise	musicien / musicienne
belge	belge	journaliste / journaliste

Examples

- Awa est sénégalaise. Elle est boulangère. — Awa is Senegalese. She is a baker.
- Louis et Hugo sont belges. — Louis and Hugo are Belgian.
- Vous êtes canadien ? — Non, je suis américain. — Are you Canadian? No, I am American.
- Ils sont musiciens, mais elle est journaliste. — They are musicians, but she is a journalist.

Common mistake

English needs “a” in “She is a nurse”, so students write Elle est une infirmière. In French, say Elle est infirmière. The article returns only with c'est: C'est une infirmière.

Elle est infirmière.

être + job = no article

C'est une infirmière.

c'est + noun = article

Two structures, one meaning.

On in Québec and France

In spoken French on almost replaces nous in both France and Québec, while nous is kept for writing and formal speech. Nationality adjectives are not capitalized in French: elle est québécoise.

Zoé's tip

Choose the pronoun in two steps: how many people, and are they all girls? One boy in a group of ten girls makes it ils.

Key points to remember

- Je becomes j' before a vowel, but not before être forms.
- On takes the same verb form as il or elle: on est.
- Ils is used for a group of boys or a mixed group; elles only for girls.
- Nationality adjectives agree and are not capitalized: elle est canadienne.
- A job after être has no article: il est médecin.

Who Is Who: Pronouns, Être, Nationalities and Jobs: frequently asked questions

What does on mean in French?

On usually means we in everyday conversation, and it can also mean people in general. It always takes the singular form of the verb, so we say on est, not on sommes.

When do I use ils and when elles?

Use elles only when every person in the group is female. Use ils for boys, for a mixed group, and for a group where you do not know the genders.

How do I conjugate être in the present?

Je suis, tu es, il/elle/on est, nous sommes, vous êtes, ils/elles sont. It is irregular, so memorize all six forms.

Why is there no article before a job in French?

After être, a job or nationality works like an adjective, so French leaves out un and une. You say elle est médecin, but with c'est you say c'est un médecin.

Are nationalities capitalized in French?

No. French nationality adjectives are written in lowercase and agree in gender and number, as in elle est sénégalaise and ils sont belges.