

Never, nothing, nobody: saying no in French

French 2 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: French negation wraps the verb in *ne* plus a second word: *jamais* (never), *plus* (no longer), *rien* (nothing), *personne* (nobody) or *pas encore* (not yet). In the *passé composé*, *ne* goes before the auxiliary and the second word usually comes right after it, but *personne* and *ni... ni* follow the past participle.

Level: French 2 (high school, ACTFL Novice High) · **Standards:** ACTFL Novice High, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational

How do you say never, nothing and nobody in French?

The pair *ne ... pas* is only one of several negative frames. Each one keeps *ne* before the verb and swaps *pas* for a word with a more precise meaning.

Expression	Meaning	Example
<i>ne ... jamais</i>	never	<i>Je ne joue jamais le dimanche.</i> — I never play on Sundays.
<i>ne ... plus</i>	no longer, not anymore	<i>Elle ne travaille plus à Dakar.</i> — She no longer works in Dakar.
<i>ne ... rien</i>	nothing	<i>Nous n'entendons rien.</i> — We hear nothing.
<i>ne ... personne</i>	nobody	<i>Il ne connaît personne ici.</i> — He knows nobody here.
<i>ne ... pas encore</i>	not yet	<i>Mon frère n'est pas encore prêt.</i> — My brother is not ready yet.
<i>ne ... ni ... ni</i>	neither ... nor	<i>Je n'aime ni le thé ni le café.</i> — I like neither tea nor coffee.



Jamais sits at the zero end of the frequency scale.

Where do the negative words go in the passé composé?

Placement rule

Ne goes before the auxiliary (avoir or être). Jamais, plus, rien and pas encore follow the auxiliary, before the participle. Personne and ni ... ni follow the participle.

Je n' ai rien mangé ne + aux. + rien + participe

Je n' ai vu personne ne + aux. + participe + per

Rien jumps before the participle; personne stays behind it.

Examples

- Il n'est jamais allé à Québec. — He has never been to Québec.
- Elle n'a pas encore répondu. — She has not answered yet.
- Nous n'avons vu personne. — We saw nobody.

Watch out

English speakers add an extra *not*. In French, rien, personne and jamais already carry the negative meaning, so pas disappears: Je ne vois personne, never Je ne vois pas personne.

How do rien and personne work as subjects?

They can open the sentence. Then ne comes after them and the verb is singular: Personne ne répond. — Nobody answers. Rien n'a changé. — Nothing has changed. Alone, they work as short answers: Qui est là ? — Personne.

What happens to un, une, du and des?

After pas, plus and jamais, the indefinite and partitive articles become de or d': Je n'ai plus de devoirs. After ni ... ni, no article stays: Il n'a ni frère ni sœur.

Zoé's tip

In the passé composé, picture a sandwich: ne + auxiliary + the negative word, then the participle. Only personne escapes the sandwich, because the person is the last thing you saw.

Culture

In fast conversation, many French speakers drop ne and say J'ai rien vu. Keep both parts in

writing, on tests and in polite speech.

Key points to remember

- Ne ... jamais, ne ... plus, ne ... rien and ne ... personne replace pas; never combine them with pas.
- In the passé composé, rien, jamais, plus and pas encore stand between the auxiliary and the participle.
- Personne and ni ... ni come after the past participle: Je n'ai vu personne.
- Rien and personne can be subjects: Personne ne répond, Rien n'a changé.
- After jamais, plus and pas, un, une, du and des become de or d'.

Never, Nothing, Nobody: Saying No in French: frequently asked questions

Do I use pas with jamais, rien or personne?

No. Jamais, plus, rien and personne replace pas. Say Je ne vois personne, never Je ne vois pas personne. Pas appears only in pas encore, where it combines with encore to mean not yet.

Where does personne go in the passé composé?

Personne comes after the past participle: Je n'ai vu personne. Rien is different: it goes between the auxiliary and the participle, as in Je n'ai rien vu.

Can I use two negative words together?

Yes, a few pairs are normal: ne ... plus rien (nothing anymore) and ne ... jamais personne (never anybody). Je n'ai plus rien à dire means I have nothing left to say. Keep a single ne before the verb.

What happens to du, de la and des in the negative?

They become de or d' after pas, plus and jamais: Je ne mange jamais de viande. After ni ... ni, no article is used: Je n'ai ni stylo ni cahier.

Why do people drop ne in speech?

In casual speech ne is short and unstressed, so it often disappears: J'ai rien dit. This is common, but formal writing, exams and polite conversation keep ne, so learn the full form first.