

Telling what happened with avoir

French 2 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: The passé composé with avoir tells what happened and is finished. Build it with the present tense of avoir plus a past participle: j'ai mangé, tu as fini, nous avons vendu. Most French verbs use avoir. In the negative, ne and pas wrap around avoir, not the participle: je n'ai pas mangé.

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

What is the passé composé with avoir?

The passé composé is the everyday French tense for finished actions: what you ate this morning, who called last night, which film your club watched on Friday. It is a compound tense, which means it has two parts: a helping verb and a past participle.

Definition

Passé composé = present tense of the helping verb + past participle. Most French verbs use avoir as the helper. A small group uses être, which is the topic of the next chapter.



Two parts, one past: the helper changes with the subject, the participle does not.

How do you form a regular past participle?

Remove the infinitive ending and add the participle ending.

Infinitive ending	Participle ending	Example
-er	-é	chanter → chanté
-ir	-i	finir → fini
-re	-u	attendre → attendu

Examples

- Léo **a chanté** sous la douche. — Leo sang in the shower.
- Nous **avons fini** le projet. — We finished the project.
- Ils **ont attendu** le bus. — They waited for the bus.

Which participles are irregular?

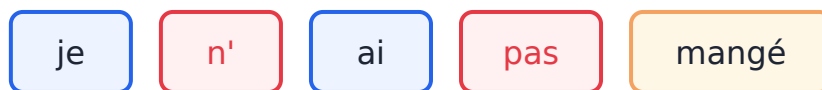
These must be memorized, and they come up constantly.

Infinitive	Participle	Meaning
faire	fait	done, made
prendre	pris	taken
avoir	eu	had
être	été	been
voir	vu	seen
boire	bu	drunk
lire	lu	read
écrire	écrit	written
dire	dit	said
mettre	mis	put
ouvrir	ouvert	opened

How do you say what did not happen?

Rule: negation

Put ne before avoir and pas right after it. The participle stays at the end: Je **n'ai pas** vu Awa. — I did not see Awa. The same frame works with jamais (never) and rien (nothing). For a yes/no question, put est-ce que in front and keep the order: Est-ce que tu as fini ?



ne ... pas entoure avoir

The negative sandwich: ne ... pas surrounds the helping verb.

Common mistake

English uses "did" in questions and negatives ("I did not eat"). French has no such word, so never translate "did" by itself. Also, after a negation, du, de la, des become de: Je n'ai pas bu **de** café. — I did not drink any coffee.

Culture note

In conversation, the passé composé is the normal past tense in France, Québec and West Africa. The passé simple appears mostly in novels and formal writing.

Zoé's tip

Say helper and participle as one chunk, like a duo: j'ai fait, tu as pris. And remember that eu sounds just like the letter u, so j'ai eu sounds like "jay u".

Key points to remember

- Formula: present of avoir + past participle (j'ai chanté).
- Regular participles: -er becomes -é, -ir becomes -i, -re becomes -u.
- Irregular participles to memorize: fait, pris, eu, été, vu, bu, lu, écrit, dit, mis.
- Negation: ne + avoir + pas + participle (nous n'avons pas fini).
- One French form means I ate, I have eaten and I did eat.

Telling What Happened with Avoir: frequently asked questions

How do you form the passé composé with avoir?

Conjugate avoir in the present tense, then add the past participle of the main verb. For example, nous avons mangé means we ate. Only avoir changes with the subject; the participle stays the same.

What are the irregular past participles every French 2 student needs?

The essential ones are fait (faire), pris (prendre), eu (avoir), été (être), vu (voir) and bu (boire). Add lu, écrit, dit, mis and ouvert and you can describe most everyday events.

Where do ne and pas go in the passé composé?

They surround the helping verb: je n'ai pas fini. The past participle comes after pas. Words like jamais and rien take the same place as pas.

Does passé composé mean I ate, I have eaten or I did eat?

All three. French has one form for them, so the context decides the English translation. J'ai mangé

can translate any of these sentences.

How do you make a question in the passé composé?

The easiest way is to put est-ce que before the statement: Est-ce que tu as vu le match ? You can also raise your voice at the end of the sentence when you speak.