

Coming, going and staying with être

French 2 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: Sixteen verbs, mostly verbs of motion and change such as aller, venir, arriver and partir, form the passé composé with être instead of avoir. The past participle then agrees with the subject: elle est allée, ils sont partis. In the negative, ne and pas wrap around être: je ne suis pas rentré.

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

Which verbs use être in the passé composé?

Most French verbs form the passé composé with avoir, but a short list of verbs uses être instead. These verbs describe going somewhere, coming back, or changing state. English speakers remember them with the mnemonic **DR MRS VANDERTRAMP**, where each letter stands for one verb.

Definition

For these sixteen verbs, passé composé = present tense of être + past participle. The participle behaves like an adjective and agrees with the subject.

Verb	Participle	Verb	Participle
devenir	devenu	descendre	descendu
revenir	revenu	entrer	entré
monter	monté	retourner	retourné
rester	resté	tomber	tombé
sortir	sorti	rentrer	rentré
venir	venu	arriver	arrivé
aller	allé	mourir	mort
naître	né	partir	parti

aller	↔	venir
entrer	↔	sortir
monter	↔	descendre
arriver	↔	partir
naître	↔	mourir

Ten of the sixteen verbs come in opposite pairs, which makes them easier to memorize.

How does the past participle agree?

Rule: agreement with être

The participle agrees in gender and number with the subject: add **-e** for a feminine subject, **-s** for a plural subject, **-es** for feminine plural. A mixed group takes the masculine plural.

masculin singulier il est allé	féminin singulier (+e) elle est allée
masculin pluriel (+s) ils sont allés	féminin pluriel (+es) elles sont allées

Four forms of one participle.

Examples

- Malik **est arrivé** à 8 h. — Malik arrived at 8:00.
- Sonia **est restée** chez sa tante. — Sonia stayed at her aunt's.
- Léa et Tom **sont partis** en Belgique. — Léa and Tom left for Belgium.

How do you make it negative or ask a question?

Wrap ne ... pas around être: Elle **n'est pas** rentrée. — She did not come home. For questions, use est-ce que (Est-ce que tu es sorti ?) or invert the helper and the subject (Es-tu sorti ?, Sont-ils rentrés ?).

Common mistake

English says "I have gone", so learners write j'ai allé. French needs je suis allé(e). Careful: when monter, descendre, sortir, rentrer or retourner have a direct object, they switch to avoir: J'ai sorti le chien. — I took the dog out.

Culture note

Official French forms ask for your birth date with né(e) le, a participle of naître with the optional -e. Birth announcements read Inès est née le 3 mars.

Zoé's tip

Picture a suitcase: if the verb means going, coming, arriving, leaving or staying put, grab être. Then draw an arrow from the participle back to the subject and ask who is moving.

Key points to remember

- About 16 verbs use être; the mnemonic DR MRS VANDERTRAMP lists them.
- Formula: present of être + past participle (elle est partie).
- The participle agrees with the subject: add -e for feminine, -s for plural.
- Negation: ne + être + pas + participle (nous ne sommes pas restés).
- Never say j'ai allé: aller always takes être.

Coming, Going and Staying with Être: frequently asked questions

What does DR MRS VANDERTRAMP stand for?

It is an English mnemonic for the sixteen verbs that use être: devenir, revenir, monter, rester, sortir, venir, aller, naître, descendre, entrer, retourner, tomber, rentrer, arriver, mourir, partir. Each letter starts one verb.

Why does the past participle agree with être?

With être, the participle works like an adjective describing the subject. So Camille est allée has an extra -e because Camille is feminine, and les garçons sont partis has -s because the subject is plural.

How do you make a negative sentence with être in the passé composé?

Put ne before être and pas after it: Nous ne sommes pas allés au match. The participle stays at the end and still agrees with the subject.

How do you ask a question with these verbs?

Add *est-ce que* before the statement (*Est-ce que vous êtes arrivés ?*) or use inversion (*Êtes-vous arrivés ?*). In both cases the participle still agrees with the subject.

Do all verbs of motion use être?

No. Only the sixteen verbs on the list do. *Marcher*, *courir* and *voyager* use *avoir*, for example: *j'ai couru*. Also, five of the sixteen use *avoir* when they have a direct object, like *J'ai sorti le chien*.