

Verbs that change their spelling

French 2 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: Stem-changing verbs are regular -er verbs whose stem changes spelling in the je, tu, il/elle and ils/elles forms, but not in nous and vous. Acheter becomes j'achète, appeler becomes j'appelle, payer becomes je paie, and manger and commencer become nous mangeons and nous commençons.

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 are stem-changing verbs?

Definition

A stem-changing verb ends in -er and takes the regular endings -e, -es, -e, -ons, -ez, -ent, but the spelling of the stem before the ending changes in four forms. The pronunciation changes too: j'achète sounds different from nous achetons.

je · tu · il/elle
ils/elles

stem changes

nous · vous

no change

The "boot": the change happens inside the boot only.

	acheter	préférer	appeler	jeter	payer
je	achète	préfère	appelle	jette	paie
tu	achètes	préfères	appelles	jettes	paies
il/elle	achète	préfère	appelle	jette	paie
nous	achetons	préférons	appelons	jetons	payons
vous	achetez	préférez	appelez	jetez	payez
ils/elles	achètent	préfèrent	appellent	jettent	paient

Which spelling patterns do these verbs follow?

Rule: four patterns

- e → è: acheter, lever, promener.
- é → è: préférer, répéter, espérer.
- Double the l or t: appeler, rappeler, jeter.
- y → i: payer, nettoyer, essayer (with payer and essayer, y is also allowed).

The change affects je, tu, il/elle, ils/elles only. The past participle stays regular: j'ai acheté.

Examples

Léo achète des billets pour Lyon. — Léo buys tickets for Lyon.

Mes cousins préfèrent le rugby. — My cousins prefer rugby.

Maëlle appelle sa grand-mère à Fort-de-France.

What happens with manger and commencer?

manger

nous mangeons

g + e before o

commencer

nous commençons

c becomes ç before o

The sound stays soft before the ending -ons.

Rule: keep the sound

Before -ons, a g would sound hard and a c would sound like k. So write nous mangeons, nous voyageons, nous commençons, nous lançons. This only affects the nous form.

How do these verbs sound in real sentences?

Examples

Tu jettes tes vieux cahiers ? — Are you throwing away your old notebooks?

Nous commençons le match à seize heures. — We start the game at 4 p.m.

Vous payez le café, et nous achetons les croissants. — You pay for the coffee, and we buy the croissants.

Ma voisine nettoie son balcon et elle espère du soleil. — My neighbor cleans her balcony and hopes for sun.

Watch out

English never changes "buy" or "eat", so learners forget the accent (j'achete is wrong) or spread the change to nous (nous achètons is wrong; write nous achetons).

Zoé's tip

Draw a boot around je, tu, il, ils. Every change stays inside the boot, and nous and vous stand outside it, as safe as ever.

Culture note

At a French cash register you may hear Vous payez par carte ou en espèces ? — Are you paying by card or in cash? Here payez keeps its y because it follows vous.

Key points to remember

- Acheter and préférer change e or é to è: j'achète, je préfère.
- Appeler and jeter double the consonant: j'appelle, je jette.
- Payer changes y to i: je paie, ils paient (je paye is also accepted).
- Nous and vous keep the infinitive stem: nous achetons, vous payez.
- Manger adds an e and commencer adds a cedilla in the nous form only: nous mangeons, nous commençons.

Verbs That Change Their Spelling: frequently asked questions

What is a stem-changing verb in French?

It is a regular -er verb whose stem changes spelling in je, tu, il/elle and ils/elles, for example acheter becomes j'achète. Nous and vous keep the infinitive stem, so you write nous achetons and vous achetez.

Why do appeler and jeter double the consonant?

The doubled l or t keeps the open sound of the vowel before it, as in j'appelle and je jette. It happens in the same four forms as the accent change, never in nous or vous.

How do I conjugate payer?

Je paie, tu paies, il paie, nous payons, vous payez, ils paient. French also accepts the spelling with

y in the singular forms, such as je paye, but nous and vous always keep the y.

Why is it nous mangeons and nous commençons?

Before the ending -ons, g and c would change sound. Adding an e after g and a cedilla under c keeps the soft sound. This applies only to the nous form.

Does the spelling change appear in the passé composé?

No. The past participle is regular: j'ai acheté, nous avons préféré, elle a appelé. The change only matters in the present tense forms inside the boot.