

Want, can and must: three key verbs

French 2 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: Vouloir (to want), pouvoir (can, may) and devoir (must, have to) are irregular French verbs. Each one is followed directly by an infinitive: Je veux jouer, Tu peux venir, Nous devons partir. Devoir can also express probability, and the conditional makes requests polite.

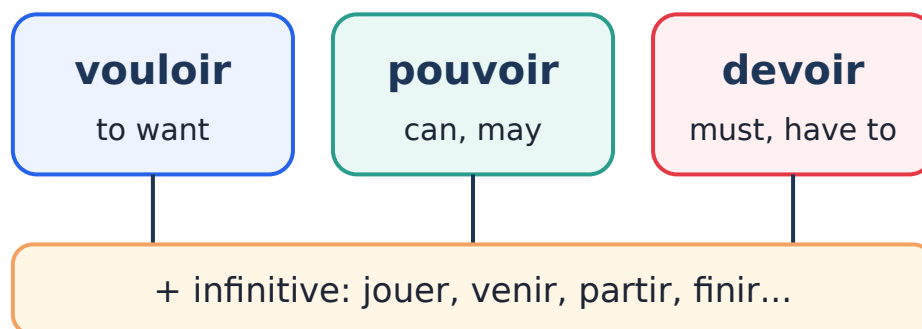
Level: French 2 (high school, ACTFL Novice High) · **Standards:** ACTFL Novice High, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational

What do vouloir, pouvoir and devoir mean, and how do you conjugate them?

Modal verbs

These three verbs say how a person relates to an action: vouloir expresses a wish, pouvoir expresses ability or permission, and devoir expresses duty. All three are irregular and often take a second verb.

Subject	vouloir	pouvoir	devoir
je	veux	peux	dois
tu	veux	peux	dois
il / elle / on	veut	peut	doit
nous	voulons	pouvons	devons
vous	voulez	pouvez	devez
ils / elles	veulent	peuvent	doivent



One conjugated modal verb, then the infinitive.

How do you build a sentence with a modal verb?

Rule

Conjugate the modal verb and leave the second verb in the infinitive. In the negative, ne ... pas goes around the modal verb only.

Examples

- Karim veut gagner le match. — Karim wants to win the game.
- Je ne peux pas sortir ce soir. — I can't go out tonight.
- Vous devez porter un casque. — You have to wear a helmet.

How do you make a polite request?

To ask for something politely, switch to the conditional: Je voudrais un jus d'orange, s'il vous plaît. — I would like an orange juice, please. Pourriez-vous répéter ? — Could you repeat that? Pourrais-je ouvrir la fenêtre ? — Could I open the window?

Common mistake

English speakers say "I want a croissant" without a second thought. In French, Je veux un croissant sounds like a demand. Use Je voudrais with adults and in shops.

What are the different meanings of devoir?

Devoir has three jobs. With an infinitive it means obligation: Nous devons finir le projet lundi. — We must finish the project Monday. It can also mean probability: Inès n'a pas répondu ; elle doit dormir. — Inès didn't answer; she must be asleep. With a noun it means to owe: Je te dois cinq euros. — I owe you five euros.

Obligation

Je dois étudier.
I have to study.

Probability

Il doit être tard.
It must be late.

To owe

Je lui dois 3 €.
I owe him 3 euros.

Three jobs for one verb.

Culture note

In a French bakery, customers greet the staff first (Bonjour !) and then order with Je voudrais... or Je vais prendre.... Skipping the greeting is considered rude.

Zoé's tip

Chant the singular forms with a rhythm: veux, veux, veut — peux, peux, peut. They sound alike, so you only learn one pattern of endings: -x, -x, -t.

Key points to remember

- Present of vouloir: veux, veux, veut, voulons, voulez, veulent.
- Present of pouvoir: peux, peux, peut, pouvons, pouvez, peuvent.
- Present of devoir: dois, dois, doit, devons, devez, doivent.
- Only the first verb is conjugated; the second one stays in the infinitive.
- Je voudrais and pourriez-vous are the polite forms for requests.

Want, Can and Must: Three Key Verbs: frequently asked questions

How do you say "I can" in French?

Use je peux, from the verb pouvoir. Add an infinitive to say what you can do: Je peux vous aider. means "I can help you." In formal questions, puis-je replaces est-ce que je peux.

Is the verb after vouloir, pouvoir or devoir conjugated?

No. Only the modal verb takes the subject's ending, and the next verb stays in the infinitive. Say Elles veulent chanter, never Elles veulent chantent.

What is the difference between je veux and je voudrais?

Je veux states a wish directly and can sound blunt. Je voudrais is the conditional and means "I would like," which is the polite choice in shops, restaurants and with teachers.

How can devoir express probability?

When the subject cannot control the action, devoir means "must be" or "must have": Il doit être malade means "He must be sick." Context tells you whether it is a duty or a guess.

Where does ne ... pas go with a modal verb?

Place it around the conjugated modal verb: Tu ne dois pas crier. The infinitive follows after pas. In this sentence the meaning is "You must not shout."