

The pluperfect: before the past

French 3 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: The plus-que-parfait is the French pluperfect, equivalent to had plus a past participle in English. Form it with the imparfait of avoir or être and the past participle. Use it for an action completed before another past action, and in si clauses that express regret, such as si j'avais su, j'aurais téléphoné.

Level: French 3 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Low) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Low, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational

How do you form the plus-que-parfait?

Take the imparfait of the auxiliary, avoir or être, and add the past participle. The choice of auxiliary and the agreement follow exactly the same rules as in the passé composé: être verbs and reflexive verbs agree with the subject.

Subject	parler (avoir)	aller (être)
je	j' avais parlé	j' étais allé(e)
tu	tu avais parlé	tu étais allé(e)
il / elle	il avait parlé	il était allé / elle était allée
nous	nous avions parlé	nous étions allé(e)s
vous	vous aviez parlé	vous étiez allé(e)(s)
ils / elles	ils avaient parlé	ils étaient allés / elles étaient allées

Rule

Negation surrounds the auxiliary: Nous **n'avions pas** compris. Adverbs such as déjà and jamais sit between the auxiliary and the participle: Elle n'était **jamais** allée à Dakar.

When do you use the plus-que-parfait?

Useful signals are déjà (already), pas encore (not yet), jamais (never), la veille (the day before) and auparavant (previously). They tell the reader that one event sits behind another, as in La veille, Kofi avait préparé son sac. — The day before, Kofi had packed his bag. If two past events happen one after the other in a story, ask which one finished first.

Use it for an event that was already finished before another event in the past. The later event is

usually in the *passé composé*, and the background is in the *imparfait*.



The pluperfect sits one step before the past event.

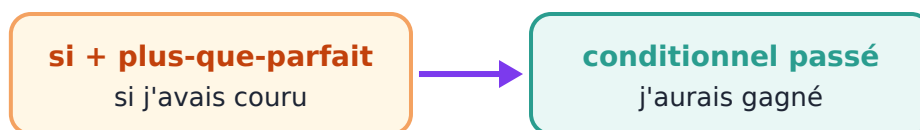
Examples

Quand Aminata est arrivée au stade, le match **avait** déjà **commencé**. — When Aminata got to the stadium, the game had already started.

Il a dit qu'il **avait** perdu son billet. — He said he had lost his ticket.

How do you express regret with si?

For something that did not happen, combine *si* + *plus-que-parfait* with the *conditionnel passé*: the conditional of the auxiliary plus the participle. *Si j'**avais couru**, j'**aurais gagné***. — If I had run, I would have won.



jamais « si j'aurais »

Regret: the if-clause and the result clause.

Common mistake

English often uses the simple past for the earlier event: *she said she finished*. French needs the pluperfect: *elle a dit qu'elle **avait fini***. Also, never put the conditional after *si*: write *si j'**avais** su*, not *si j'**aurais** su*.

Culture note

In French novels, the *plus-que-parfait* often partners with the *passé simple*: *Quand il arriva, elle était déjà partie*. In everyday speech, French speakers use the *passé composé* with the *plus-que-parfait* instead.

Zoé's tip

Draw a mini timeline. Whatever sits further left, the earlier event, gets the plus-que-parfait. The later event gets the passé composé.

Key points to remember

- Formation: imparfait of avoir or être + past participle (j'avais fini, elle était partie).
- Same auxiliary and the same agreement rules as the passé composé.
- It describes the earlier of two past events: le train était déjà parti.
- Si + plus-que-parfait is followed by the conditionnel passé to express regret.
- Reported speech in the past shifts passé composé to plus-que-parfait.

The Pluperfect: Before the Past: frequently asked questions

How is the plus-que-parfait formed in French?

Use the imparfait of avoir or être followed by the past participle: j'avais fini, elle était partie. The auxiliary and agreement rules are the same as for the passé composé.

When should I use the plus-que-parfait instead of the passé composé?

Use it for an action that was completed before another action in the past. For example, in Quand je suis arrivé, le film avait déjà commencé, the film started first.

How do I express a regret about the past in French?

Use si plus the plus-que-parfait, then the conditionnel passé: Si j'avais su, je t'aurais prévenu. This describes something that did not happen.

Does the past participle agree in the plus-que-parfait?

Yes. With être it agrees with the subject: elles étaient parties. With avoir it agrees with a direct object placed before the verb: les lettres qu'il avait écrites.

Can I say si j'aurais?

No. After si you never use the conditional. Write si j'avais su, j'aurais appelé: the plus-que-parfait goes in the si clause and the conditionnel passé in the result clause.