

Building subjunctive forms step by step

French 3 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: The French present subjunctive is built from the ils/elles form of the present tense: drop -ent and add -e, -es, -e, -ions, -iez, -ent. Nous and vous copy the imparfait forms. Seven common verbs break the pattern: être, avoir, aller, faire, pouvoir, savoir and vouloir. Memorize those seven and every other verb follows the rule.

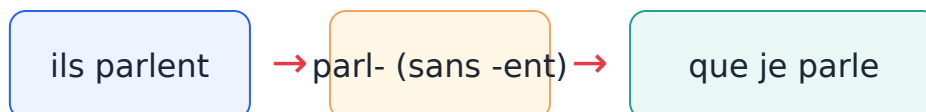
Level: French 3 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Low) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Low, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational

How is the present subjunctive built?

The subjunctive is a mood, not a tense. It appears in a clause introduced by que after certain triggers, and this page covers only the forms. Our frame sentence is Il faut que... — "It is necessary that...".

Rule: start from ils

Take the ils/elles form of the present indicative, remove -ent, then add six endings: **-e, -es, -e, -ions, -iez, -ent**.



stem + -e, -es, -e, -ions, -iez, -ent

From the ils form to the subjunctive in two moves.

	parler	finir	prendre	venir
que je	parle	finisse	prenne	vienne
que tu	parles	finisses	prennes	viennes
qu'il/elle	parle	finisse	prenne	vienne
que nous	parlions	finissions	prenions	venions
que vous	parliez	finissiez	preniez	veniez
qu'ils/elles	parlent	finissent	prennent	viennent

Why do nous and vous change their stem?

For nous and vous, the subjunctive borrows the imparfait form. That is why verbs with two stems switch back and forth: Il faut que je boive but que nous buvions; que tu voies but que vous voyiez. Verbs in -ier show a double i: que nous étudiions.

que je	que tu	qu'il	que nous	que vous	qu'ils
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boiv- (ils boivent) buv- (imparfait) boiv-

boive, boives, boive / buvions, buviez / boivent

Two stems for one verb: ils for four persons, imparfait for two.

Which seven verbs are irregular?

Verb	je	tu	il	nous	vous	ils
être	sois	sois	soit	soyons	soyez	soient
avoir	aie	aies	ait	ayons	ayez	aient
aller	aille	ailles	aille	allions	alliez	aillent
faire	fasse	fasses	fasse	fassions	fassiez	fassent
pouvoir	puisse	puisses	puisse	puissions	puissiez	puissent
savoir	sache	saches	sache	sachions	sachiez	sachent
vouloir	veuille	veuille	veuille	voulions	vouliez	veussent

In sentences

- Il faut que j'aille à la gare de Lyon-Perrache. — I have to go to the station.
- Il faut que nous soyons à Dakar avant la nuit. — We must be in Dakar before nightfall.
- Il faut qu'elle sache le code. — She needs to know the code.

Common mistake

English speakers keep the indicative: *Il faut que tu fais ton lit. Correct: Il faut que tu **fasses** ton lit. Also watch -er verbs: que tu parles looks identical to the indicative, so the clue is the trigger, not the ending.

Culture note

French speakers use the subjunctive every day without noticing: Il faut que j'y aille is a normal way to say "I have to go" when leaving a conversation.

Zoé's tip

I write être, avoir, aller, faire, pouvoir, savoir, vouloir on a sticky note inside my pencil case. Seven rebels, one note, and every other verb obeys the ils rule.

Key points to remember

- Stem = ils form of the present minus -ent (ils prennent gives prenn-).
- Endings: -e, -es, -e, -ions, -iez, -ent.
- Nous and vous look like the imparfait: que nous prenions, que vous preniez.
- Seven irregular verbs: être, avoir, aller, faire, pouvoir, savoir, vouloir.
- The subjunctive almost always follows que in a second clause.

Building Subjunctive Forms Step by Step: frequently asked questions

How do you form the present subjunctive in French?

Take the ils form of the present tense, remove -ent, and add -e, -es, -e, -ions, -iez, -ent. For nous and vous, use the imparfait forms.

Which French verbs have an irregular subjunctive?

The seven most common are être, avoir, aller, faire, pouvoir, savoir and vouloir. Aller and vouloir keep their imparfait forms for nous and vous (allions, voulions).

Why is que always in front of the subjunctive?

The subjunctive normally sits in a second clause linked by que. In conjugation tables, learners write que je, que tu, qu'il to remember this.

Is the present subjunctive the same as the present indicative?

For -er verbs, je, tu, il and ils look the same in both moods. The difference appears with irregular verbs and with nous and vous in many verbs, so the trigger decides the mood.

How do you conjugate prendre in the subjunctive?

Start from ils prennent, so the stem is prenn-: que je prenne, que tu prennes, qu'il prenne. Nous and vous use the imparfait stem: prenions, preniez.