

Feelings, fears and doubts in the subjunctive

French 3 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: After expressions of emotion (être content que, avoir peur que) and doubt (douter que, ne pas penser que), French uses the subjunctive. Affirmative penser que and croire que express certainty, so they take the indicative. When the subject stays the same, use de plus an infinitive: Je suis content de partir.

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

Which feelings trigger the subjunctive?

When a speaker reacts to what someone else does or what is happening, the reaction is a feeling, not a fact. French puts the second verb in the subjunctive after que.

Expression	Example
être content / heureux que	Je suis content que tu viennes à Montréal. — I'm glad you're coming to Montréal.
être triste / désolé que	Elle est triste que sa cousine habite si loin.
être surpris / étonné que	Nous sommes surpris que le musée soit fermé.
avoir peur que	Mon frère a peur que le vol soit annulé.
regretter que	Je regrette que vous ne puissiez pas rester.



être content que



avoir peur que



être surpris que

Three feelings, one structure: que + subjunctive.

Why does douter que differ from penser que?

A doubt is a state of mind without certainty, so douter que takes the subjunctive. Penser que and croire que express a belief held as true, so they take the indicative. Make them negative and the certainty disappears: the subjunctive returns.

Certainty: indicative	Doubt or denial: subjunctive
Je pense que Clara a raison.	Je ne pense pas que Clara ait raison.
Je crois que le musée est ouvert.	Je ne crois pas que le musée soit ouvert.
Je suis sûr que tu viens .	Je ne suis pas sûr que tu viennes .
Il est clair que nous pouvons gagner.	Je doute que nous puissions gagner.

certain : indicatif

doute : subjonctif

penser que · croire que

douter que · ne pas penser que

Certainty on the left, doubt on the right.

Questions are a gray zone. Penses-tu que Clara ait raison ? usually takes the subjunctive, because the speaker is asking and does not know. Penses-tu que Clara a raison ? is also heard in everyday speech. For tests, choose the subjunctive after a question or a negation with penser and croire: it is always accepted and shows control of the contrast.

Common mistake

English "I hope you come" feels like a wish, but espérer que takes the indicative: J'espère que tu **viens**. And with one subject, avoid que: Je suis content **de partir**, not *Je suis content que je parte.

Culture note

In careful writing, avoir peur que often adds a small ne: J'ai peur qu'il ne pleuve. It does not make the sentence negative and is optional in speech.

Zoé's tip

Facts I am sure about live in my head: indicative. Feelings and doubts live in my heart: subjunctive. I tap my forehead or my chest before I write the verb.

Key points to remember

- Emotion triggers (être content que, avoir peur que, regretter que) take the subjunctive.
- Doubt triggers (douter que, ne pas penser que, ne pas être sûr que) take the subjunctive.
- Penser que, croire que and être sûr que take the indicative in the affirmative.

- Espérer que takes the indicative even though it is a wish.
- Same subject: de plus infinitive (J'ai peur de tomber).

Feelings, Fears and Doubts in the Subjunctive: frequently asked questions

Why does douter que take the subjunctive?

Doubt means the speaker does not hold the statement as true, so French marks it with the subjunctive. If the speaker is sure, the indicative returns: Je ne doute pas que, in plain speech, is often followed by the indicative.

Does penser que take the indicative or the subjunctive?

Affirmative penser que takes the indicative (Je pense qu'il vient). Negative ne pas penser que usually takes the subjunctive (Je ne pense pas qu'il vienne), because the certainty is removed.

Does espérer que take the subjunctive in French?

No. Espérer que takes the indicative: J'espère que tu viens. This is a classic exception that surprises English speakers because espérer expresses a wish.

When do you use de and an infinitive after an emotion?

Use it when the subject of the feeling and the action is the same: Je suis content de partir. With two subjects, use que and the subjunctive: Je suis content que tu partes.

Which emotions take que plus the subjunctive?

Être content, heureux, triste, désolé, surpris, étonné, fâché, ravi que, plus avoir peur que and regretter que. All of them need two different subjects.