

Rules, orders and wishes with the subjunctive

French 3 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: After expressions of necessity and will, such as *il faut que*, *il est important que*, *vouloir que* and *exiger que*, French uses *que* plus the subjunctive when the two clauses have different subjects. When the subject stays the same, French switches to the infinitive: *Je veux partir*, never *Je veux que je parte*.

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 expressions of necessity and will trigger the subjunctive?

When one person needs, wants or demands that another person do something, the second verb moves to the subjunctive. The link word is *que*.

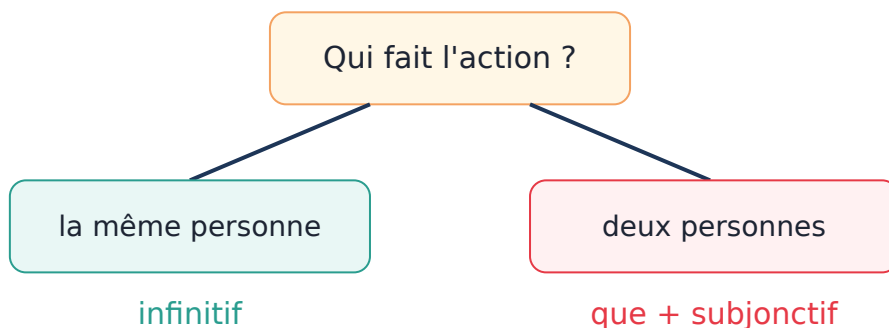
Trigger	Meaning	Example
<i>il faut que</i>	it is necessary that	<i>Il faut que tu révises le chapitre.</i>
<i>il est important que</i>	it is important that	<i>Il est important que nous parlions français au club.</i>
<i>vouloir que</i>	to want (someone) to	<i>Mon entraîneur veut que nous courions plus vite.</i>
<i>exiger que</i>	to demand that	<i>Le patron exige que vous portiez un tablier.</i>
<i>préférer que</i>	to prefer that	<i>Je préfère que tu viennes en bus.</i>

Rule: two people, two clauses

Subject 1 + trigger + **que** + subject 2 + subjunctive. The subjunctive forms are the ones from the previous chapter: the *ils* stem plus -e, -es, -e, -ions, -iez, -ent, and the irregular verbs *être*, *avoir*, *aller*, *faire*, *pouvoir*, *savoir*, *vouloir*.

When do you use the infinitive instead of *que*?

English says "I want to leave" and "I want you to leave" with nearly the same pattern. French separates them clearly.



One actor or two? That decides the structure.

Same subject or different subjects

- Awa veut **réussir** son bac. — Awa wants to pass her exam.
- Awa veut **que son frère réussisse**. — Awa wants her brother to pass.
- Il est important **d'arriver** tôt. — It is important to arrive early.
- Il faut **manger** avant le match. — One must eat before the game.

Note that *il est important* takes *de* before an infinitive, while *il faut* and *vouloir* take the infinitive directly.

How strong is each trigger?



From a gentle wish to a firm order.

Other impersonal phrases follow the same pattern: *il est nécessaire que*, *il est essentiel que* and *il vaut mieux que*. In a conversation with a teacher or a boss, the choice among them tells how firm the request is: *Il vaut mieux que tu répètes* sounds gentle, while *Il est nécessaire que tu répètes* sounds official.

Common mistake

English speakers write **Je veux toi partir* or **Je veux que je parte*. Correct: Je veux **que tu partes** (two people) and Je veux **partir** (one person).

Culture note

The final exam of French high school is the baccalauréat, called le bac. Teachers say Il faut que vous révisiez all year long.

Zoé's tip

Before writing, I count the people with my pen: one person means infinitive, two people mean que and a subjunctive. It works every time.

Key points to remember

- Il faut que, il est important que, vouloir que and exiger que all trigger the subjunctive.
- Different subjects: trigger + que + subjunctive (Je veux que tu partes).
- Same subject: trigger + infinitive (Je veux partir; Il est important d'arriver tôt).
- Il faut + infinitive states a general rule with no named person.
- Exiger is stronger than vouloir, and vouloir is stronger than préférer.

Rules, Orders and Wishes with the Subjunctive: frequently asked questions

Why does vouloir que take the subjunctive in French?

The speaker expresses a wish about what another person should do, and that action is not yet real. French marks this unreal, desired action with the subjunctive.

When do you use the infinitive instead of the subjunctive?

Use the infinitive when the person who wants and the person who acts are the same: Je veux partir. Use que plus the subjunctive when they differ: Je veux que tu partes.

Is il faut que followed by the subjunctive or the infinitive?

Both exist. Il faut que tu partes names a person. Il faut partir states a general rule with no one named.

What is the difference between vouloir and exiger?

Vouloir que expresses a wish or request. Exiger que is a firm demand, used by bosses, rules and authorities, and it also takes the subjunctive.

Does il est important que take de or que?

Before a second subject use que plus the subjunctive: Il est important que tu dormes. Before a general or same-subject infinitive use de: Il est important de dormir.