

Describing paintings and analyzing poems

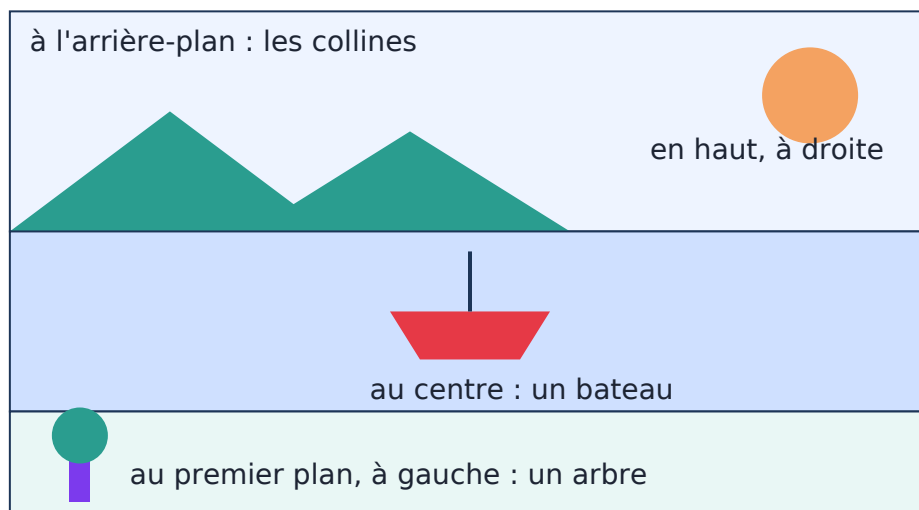
French 4 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: To describe a painting in French, name the work, then place elements with *au premier plan*, *à l'arrière-plan*, *à gauche* and *à droite*, and add colors and mood. To analyze a poem, count the *vers* and *strophes*, identify the rhymes, then name the *figures de style*, such as comparison or metaphor.

Level: French 4 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Mid) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Mid, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational, WL 4.1 Language Comparisons, WL 2.2 Cultural Products

How do you describe a painting in French?

Begin with the type of work and the subject, then guide the reader through space. Choose one order, from the background to the foreground or the reverse, and keep it. Use *Ce tableau représente...* — This painting shows... — or *On voit...* — We see...



Zones of a painting, from background to foreground.

French	English
un paysage	a landscape
une nature morte	a still life
une toile	a canvas
les couleurs chaudes / froides	warm / cool colors

Common mistake

Une librairie sells books; it is a bookstore, not a library. For a library, say une bibliothèque. Also, un roman is a novel, never a “romance.”

What are the main literary genres?

Each genre has its own French name and its own purpose. A writer of novels is un romancier or une romancière; a writer of poems is un poète or une poétesse.

Genre	Meaning
le roman	a long story in prose
la nouvelle	a short story
le poème	a text in verse, often with rhyme
la pièce de théâtre	a play, written for the stage
la fable	a short tale with a moral
la bande dessinée	a comic book

To talk about your reading, use the passé composé for what you did and the present for what the book says: J'ai lu une nouvelle qui raconte la vie d'un pêcheur. — I read a short story that tells the life of a fisherman. To give an opinion, add J'ai trouvé ce livre émouvant, parce que les personnages sont sincères. — I found this book moving, because the characters are sincere.

How do you analyze a poem?

Look at the form before the meaning. A poem has des vers (lines) grouped in des strophes. Rhymes can be crossed (ABAB), flat (AABB) or embraced (ABBA).

Le vent range les nuages
comme un berger ses moutons ;
la mer, d'un geste sage,
dessine un long sillon.

A un vers
B
A une strophe
(4 vers)
B

A four-line stanza with crossed rhymes.

Figures de style

- la comparaison: rapide **comme** l'éclair
- la métaphore: le lac est un miroir

- la personnification: la mer dessine
- l'hyperbole: j'ai mille choses à faire

Culture note

The name of Impressionism comes from a painting by Claude Monet, *Impression, soleil levant*, which was shown at an 1874 exhibition in Paris. A critic mocked it, and the label stuck.

Zoé's tip

When you analyze, always add the effect: not only *c'est une métaphore*, but *elle donne une image de calme*.

Key points to remember

- Position words (au premier plan, au centre, à l'arrière-plan) organize the description of a painting.
- Genres include le roman, la nouvelle, le poème, la pièce de théâtre, la fable.
- A poem is made of vers (lines) grouped in strophes; rhymes follow patterns such as ABAB.
- A comparison uses *comme*; a metaphor states the identity without it.
- Une librairie is a bookstore, not a library.

Describing Paintings and Analyzing Poems: frequently asked questions

How do I describe the position of objects in a painting?

Use *au premier plan*, *au centre*, *à l'arrière-plan*, *à gauche*, *à droite*, *en haut*, *en bas*. Pick an order, such as background to foreground, and keep it.

What is the difference between a vers and a strophe?

A vers is one line of a poem. A strophe is a group of lines, like a stanza in English.

What is the difference between a comparison and a metaphor?

A comparison uses a link word such as *comme*, as in *fort comme un lion*. A metaphor states the identity directly, as in *cet homme est un lion*.

Is une librairie a library?

No. Une librairie is a bookstore. A public library is une bibliothèque.

How do I give my opinion of a book?

Use J'ai trouvé ce roman... followed by an adjective and a reason with parce que. Quote or paraphrase one scene to support the opinion.