

Debating society's big questions politely

French 4 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: To debate a social issue in French, state your position with *je pense que* + indicative or *je ne pense pas que* + subjunctive, back it with one argument and one example, and react to others with graded phrases from *tout à fait d'accord* to *pas du tout d'accord*. Polite openers like *certes* keep the tone respectful.

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

What vocabulary do you need for social issues?

Social topics share a core set of nouns. Learn them with their articles, because most of them are feminine or end in a silent letter that tempts English speakers into the wrong gender.

French	English
une inégalité	an inequality
l'égalité des chances	equal opportunity
l'accès à l'éducation	access to education
une bourse	a scholarship
un immigré / une immigrée	an immigrant
l'intégration (f.)	integration
le chômage	unemployment
le logement social	public housing

How do you state your opinion and your argument?

Mood after opinion verbs

After an affirmative opinion, use the indicative. After a negative or doubtful opinion, use the subjunctive. After *il faut que* and *il est important que*, use the subjunctive as well.

Examples

Je pense que l'école **doit** être gratuite pour tous. — I think school must be free for everyone.

Je ne pense pas que ce système **soit** juste. — I don't think this system is fair.

Il faut que chaque élève **ait** les mêmes chances. — Every student must have the same chances.

pas du tout

pas vraiment

plutôt

tout à fait

Je suis ... d'accord

Degrees of agreement.

How do you agree or disagree politely?

A debate is not a fight. Keep the other person's idea alive before you answer it. In a class debate, speak in short turns, never interrupt, and name the idea you are answering: Sur la question du logement, je pense que... — On the question of housing, I think that... This habit helps listeners follow your argument and shows respect for the speaker before you.

- Agree: Je suis tout à fait d'accord. · Vous avez raison.
- Partly agree: Certes, mais... · C'est vrai, cependant...
- Disagree: Je ne suis pas convaincu. · Je vois les choses autrement.
- Clarify: Si je comprends bien, vous dites que...

Certes...

mais...

par exemple...

donc...

A polite reply in four steps.

Common mistake

English speakers often write Je ne pense pas que c'est juste after the English *I don't think it is fair*. After a negative opinion verb, French needs the subjunctive: Je ne pense pas que ce soit juste. Also remember that une immigration is a process, while un immigré is a person.

Équité at school

French public schools are free and secular. Many families also receive a back-to-school allowance, and some students get a bourse for secondary or university studies. The motto Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité appears on school buildings.

Zoé's tip

Prepare three sentences before a debate: one opinion, one example and one concession. You can reuse them in almost any topic.

Key points to remember

- Je pense que takes the indicative; je ne pense pas que takes the subjunctive.
- Il faut que, il est important que and il est essentiel que take the subjunctive.
- Agreement has degrees: tout à fait d'accord, plutôt d'accord, pas vraiment d'accord, pas du tout d'accord.
- Strong debaters concede a point before replying: certes, vous avez raison, mais...
- Key topics: inégalité, immigration, accès à l'éducation, égalité des chances.

Debating Society's Big Questions Politely: frequently asked questions

Does je pense que take the subjunctive?

No. Je pense que takes the indicative: je pense que c'est juste. The negative je ne pense pas que takes the subjunctive.

How do you say I disagree politely in French?

Say Je ne suis pas tout à fait d'accord or Je vois les choses autrement. These phrases keep the discussion calm.

What is the difference between immigration and immigré?

L'immigration is the movement of people into a country. Un immigré or une immigrée is one person who has moved there.

What does l'égalité des chances mean?

It means equal opportunity, the idea that every student should have the same chance to succeed, whatever their family background.

Which expressions open a polite reply?

Use certes, vous avez raison or si je comprends bien to acknowledge the other speaker before you answer.