

Formal, casual and slang: choosing your register

French 4 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: French has three main registers: soutenu (formal, for letters and ceremonies), courant (standard, for school, shops and daily life) and familier (casual, for friends and family). Choose the register from the person you are talking to and the situation. Slang such as verlan and texting abbreviations belongs only to the familier level.

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 2.1 Cultural Practices

What are the registers of French?

Definition

A register (un registre de langue) is the level of language you choose for a given audience. The same idea can be said in a formal way, a standard way or a casual way. Good speakers move easily between them.

soutenu

Je vous prie de bien vouloir m'excuser.

courant

Excusez-moi, je suis en retard.

familier

Désolé, j'suis à la bourre !

One apology, three levels.

How does the vocabulary change from one register to another?

Idea	Soutenu	Courant	Familier
book	un ouvrage	un livre	un bouquin
car	une automobile	une voiture	une bagnole
job	un emploi	un travail	un boulot

Idea	Soutenu	Courant	Familier
to eat	se restaurer	manger	bouffer
friend	un ami	un copain	un pote

What changes in grammar, verlan and texting?

Rule

In casual speech, *ne* disappears (Je sais pas), *tu* merges with the verb (T'as vu ?), and questions use intonation instead of inversion. In formal French, you keep *ne ... pas*, use *vous*, and may invert: Avez-vous vu ce film ?

Examples

- Pourriez-vous m'indiquer la gare ? — Could you show me the station? (formal)
- Tu sais où est la gare ? — Do you know where the station is? (casual)
- Cette meuf est ouf ! — That girl is crazy! (verlan: femme, fou)
- Slt, tkt, a+ ! — Hi, don't worry, see you later! (texting)

Common mistake

English speakers read *familier* as *familiar*, but it means casual or informal. And *courant* means standard, not *current*. A second trap is using slang with a teacher, a boss or an adult stranger: Salut, t'as vu mon dossier ? sounds rude in an email to a principal.

Culture note

Verlan comes from *l'envers* (the reverse). It has been popular among young people in France for decades, and some words, such as *meuf* and *ouf*, are now widely understood. Still, French adults expect polite, standard language in shops, offices and schools.

mail to the principal
soutenu

order at the bakery
courant

text to a friend
familier

Who is listening? That decides the register.

Match the register to the audience.

How do you choose the right register in real life?

Ask yourself three questions before you speak or write. Who is my reader or listener? How well do I know this person? What is the purpose of the message?

- With a teacher, a boss or a stranger: use *vous*, full negatives and polite formulas such as *Je vous remercie*.
- In a shop, a restaurant or a classroom discussion: use standard French, clear and friendly.
- With close friends, teammates or siblings: casual French is natural, and a little *verlan* or a texting shortcut adds color.

You can also play with registers on purpose: a joke between friends often borrows a formal phrase, such as *Veillez agréer mes salutations distinguées* at the end of a silly text.

Zoé's tip

When in doubt, choose *courant* and *vous*. Nobody is offended by polite standard French, but slang with the wrong person can close a door.

Key points to remember

- *Soutenu* = formal, *courant* = standard, *familier* = casual; *argot* and *verlan* are slang.
- *Familier* does not mean familiar: it means informal.
- Casual French drops *ne* in negatives and often uses *on* instead of *nous*.
- *Verlan* reverses syllables: *femme* becomes *meuf*, *fou* becomes *ouf*.
- Texting shortcuts like *bcp*, *slt* and *mdr* stay in messages to friends.

Formal, Casual and Slang: Choosing Your Register: frequently asked questions

What are the three levels of language in French?

They are *soutenu* (formal), *courant* (standard) and *familier* (casual). Slang (*argot*) and *verlan* are part of the *familier* level. Choose the one that fits your audience and the situation.

What is *verlan*?

Verlan is a kind of slang that reverses the syllables of a word, such as *femme* becoming *meuf*. The word *verlan* itself comes from *l'envers*. Use it only with friends.

Does *familier* mean familiar?

No. In French, *familier* means informal or casual. It is a false friend. Speakers use it for words like *bouquin* or *bagnole*, which are fine with friends but not in an essay.

Can I use texting abbreviations like *tkl* or *slt* at school?

Use them only in private messages with friends. In an email or a written assignment, write full words such as salut and ne t'inquiète pas.

How do I sound polite in French?

Use vous with adults you do not know, keep ne ... pas, and choose polite phrases such as Pourriez-vous ... ? or Je vous remercie. Avoid slang and abbreviations.