

Reading stories told in the passé simple

French 4 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: The passé simple is a literary past tense that narrates finished actions in novels, fairy tales and history books. French speakers almost never use it in conversation, so learners must recognize it, not produce it. Its endings follow three patterns: -a for -er verbs, -it for most other verbs, and -ut for u-stem verbs.

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 is the passé simple and when do you meet it?

The passé simple tells what happened in a story: actions that are finished and cut off from the present. You find it in novels, fairy tales, biographies and history textbooks. In speech and in texts to friends, French uses the passé composé instead. In French 4 the goal is to *recognize* the forms and follow the plot.

Definition

The passé simple is a one-word past tense with no auxiliary verb. It appears mostly in the third person, because a narrator talks about "he, she, they".

À l'écrit

passé simple
Elle ouvrit la porte.

À l'oral

passé composé
Elle a ouvert la porte.

Same meaning, two registers: story pages versus conversation.

How do you form the passé simple?

Drop the infinitive ending and add the endings of one of three families.

Person	-er: parler	-ir/-re: finir	u-stem: vouloir
je	parlai	finis	voulus
tu	parlas	finis	voulus

Person	-er: parler	-ir/-re: finir	u-stem: vouloir
il/elle	parla	finit	voulut
nous	parlâmes	finîmes	voulûmes
vous	parlâtes	finîtes	voulûtes
ils/elles	parlèrent	finirent	voulurent

-a il parla	-it il finit, il prit	-ut il voulut, il fut
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The three il/elle endings.

Which irregular forms should you recognize?

Infinitive	il/elle	ils/elles	Meaning
être	fut	furent	was / were
avoir	eut	eurent	had
faire	fit	firent	did / made
venir	vint	vinrent	came
voir	vit	virent	saw
prendre	prit	prirent	took

Rule: passé simple and imparfait work as a team

The imparfait paints the background; the passé simple moves the plot forward.

Examples

- Il pleuvait quand Awa **arriva** à la gare. — It was raining when Awa arrived at the station.
- Le roi **fut** furieux et **prit** son épée. — The king was furious and took his sword.
- Les enfants **virent** une lumière. — The children saw a light.

Common mistakes

Do not read il parla as a present tense because it is short. Also, il finit can be present or passé simple: only the context of the story tells you. Keep the cedilla and the extra e: il commença, il mangea.

Culture note

Albert Camus wrote *L'Étranger* (1942) in the passé composé on purpose, which gives the narrator a flat, spoken voice. Most classic novels choose the passé simple.

Zoé's tip

When you read a story, hunt for third-person verbs ending in -a, -it, -ut or -rent. Translate them with the English simple past, then find the infinitive.

Key points to remember

- The passé simple is written, not spoken: it lives in novels, tales, biographies and history books.
- -er verbs take -ai, -as, -a, -âmes, -âtes, -èrent; most -ir and -re verbs take -is, -is, -it, -îmes, -îtes, -irent.
- U-stem verbs (vouloir, pouvoir, devoir, savoir) take -us, -us, -ut, -ûmes, -ûtes, -urent.
- Irregular stems to know: fut (être), eut (avoir), fit (faire), vint (venir), vit (voir), dit (dire), prit (prendre).
- Most sentences use the third person: il/elle and ils/elles.

Reading Stories Told in the Passé Simple: frequently asked questions

Do I need to speak using the passé simple?

No. Native speakers use the passé composé in conversation, emails and messages. You only need to recognize the passé simple when you read literature, fairy tales and history texts.

How do I find the infinitive of a passé simple verb?

Look at the ending. A final -a or -èrent points to an -er verb, -it or -irent to an -ir or -re verb, and -ut or -urent to a u-stem verb such as vouloir. Irregular forms like fit and vint must be memorized.

Why is il finit sometimes confusing?

Il finit is both the present and the passé simple of finir. The surrounding verbs show which one it is: if the text tells a past story, read it as the passé simple.

Which tense goes with the passé simple for background details?

The imparfait. It describes weather, feelings and ongoing situations, while the passé simple gives the sudden or completed events that push the story forward.

Are there passé simple forms for je and tu?

Yes, but they are rare because narrators mostly speak about other people. First-person forms appear in autobiographies and in stories told by a character.