

Past subjunctive: feelings about earlier events

French 4 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: The French past subjunctive (*subjonctif passé*) is used when a subjunctive trigger refers to an action that is already finished. Form it with the subjunctive of *avoir* or *être* plus a past participle: *que j'aie fini*, *qu'elle soit partie*. The present subjunctive covers actions at the same time or later.

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 past subjunctive?

Definition

The *subjonctif passé* is the compound form of the subjunctive. It appears in a clause that needs the subjunctive (emotion, doubt, necessity, concession) when the action in that clause is already over.

Je suis ravie que tu sois venu à la fête de l'école. — I'm delighted that you came to the school party.

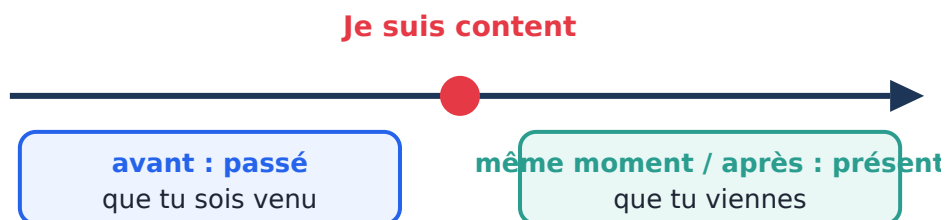
How do you form the past subjunctive?

Rule

Present subjunctive of *avoir* or *être* + past participle. The auxiliary and the agreement follow the same rules as in the *passé composé*.

Subject	With <i>avoir</i> : <i>finir</i>	With <i>être</i> : <i>partir</i>
que je	que j' aie fini	que je sois parti(e)
que tu	que tu aies fini	que tu sois parti(e)
qu'il / qu'elle	qu'il ait fini	qu'elle soit partie
que nous	que nous ayons fini	que nous soyons parti(e)s
que vous	que vous ayez fini	que vous soyez parti(e)(s)
qu'ils / qu'elles	qu'ils aient fini	qu'ils soient partis

How do you choose between present and past?



The tense of the subjunctive shows when the second action happens, compared with the main verb.

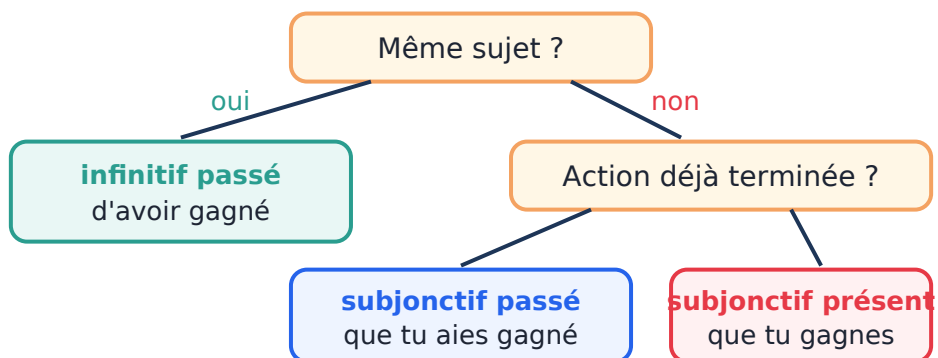
Rule

Earlier than the main verb: *subjonctif passé*. At the same time or later: *subjonctif présent*.

Examples

- Bien qu'il ait neigé toute la nuit, les bus ont circulé. — Although it snowed all night, the buses ran.
- Je doute que Lucas ait compris la consigne. — I doubt that Lucas understood the instructions.
- Il est dommage que nous ne soyons pas allés au concert. — It's a pity we didn't go to the concert.
- Il faut que j'aie fini avant que tu arrives. — I must have finished before you arrive.

What if both verbs have the same subject?



Three questions lead to the right structure.

With one subject, French prefers the past infinitive: Je suis fier d'avoir gagné. — I'm proud to have won.

Watch out

English hides the difference: *I'm glad you came* and *I'm glad you're coming* both look simple. In French, *que tu sois venu* and *que tu viennes* are not interchangeable. Also remember that *après que* takes the indicative: *Après que tu es parti*.

Culture note

French also has an imperfect and a pluperfect subjunctive, but they belong almost only to literature and formal writing. In speech and everyday texts, the present and past subjunctive do all the work.

Zoé's tip

Ask yourself: has the second action already happened when I speak? If yes, add *aie / sois + participle*.

Key points to remember

- Formation: subjunctive of *avoir* or *être* + past participle (*que tu aies compris*, *qu'ils soient arrivés*).
- Use it after a subjunctive trigger when the second action happened before the first.
- Present subjunctive: same time or later; past subjunctive: earlier.
- If both verbs share one subject, use the infinitive instead: *je suis fier d'avoir gagné*.
- *Après que* takes the indicative, not the subjunctive.

Past Subjunctive: Feelings About Earlier Events: frequently asked questions

How do you form the *subjonctif passé*?

Use the present subjunctive of *avoir* or *être* (*aie, aies, ait, ayons, ayez, aient / sois, sois, soit, soyons, soyez, soient*) and add the past participle. Agreement follows the *passé composé* rules.

When is the past subjunctive used instead of the present?

Use it when the subjunctive clause describes something that happened before the main verb, as in *je suis content que tu sois venu*. The present subjunctive is for actions happening at the same time or later.

Which expressions trigger the past subjunctive?

The same triggers as the present subjunctive: emotions (*je regrette que*), doubt (*je doute que*), necessity (*il faut que*) and concession (*bien que, quoique*). Only the time relationship decides between the two.

Can the past subjunctive refer to a future deadline?

Yes. Il faut que j'aie fini avant midi means the action must be completed by that future moment. It is the subjunctive counterpart of the futur antérieur.

Does après que take the subjunctive?

In standard French it takes the indicative: après que tu es arrivé or après que tu seras arrivé. Using the subjunctive after après que is a frequent mistake.