Les sons en français

Sounds of French

L'Alphabet

A - *a*
B - *bé*
C - *cé*
D - *dé*
E - *e*
F - *effe*
G - *gé*
H - *ash*
I - *i*
J - *ji*
K - *ka*
L - *elle*
M - *emme*
N - *enne*
O - *o*
P - *pé*
Q - *ku*
R - *erre*
S - *esse*
T - *té*
U - *u*
V - *vé*
W - *double vé*
X - *iks*
Y - *i grec*
Z - *zéd*

The icon means there is an audio for that section. Audios are identified with a number and the title of the section.

Vowel sounds

In the French alphabet there are 6 vowel sounds:

A/a/ **E**/e/ **I**/i/ **O**/o/ **U**/u/ **Y**/y/

Now, let’s work on each vowel individually…

Letter / Sound A

- **A as in *fat*:** ami (friend), malade (sick), page, table, patte (paw) , casserole (pan).
- **A followed by *n*:** dans (in), sans (without), plan.
- **With *Â* or followed by *S*:** Âme (soul), bâtir (to build), base, classe, pas (not).
- **Before *ille*:** Paille (straw).
- ***Silent a*:** Août (august).

Letter / Sound E

- ***Uh*: le (the), premier (first), repas (meal).**
- **E as in *set*: merci (thanks), restaurant.**
- **Followed by n, *en* as in *encore*: vent (wind), entrer (to enter), cent (one hundred).**
- **Followed by r: parler (to talk), diner.**

Letter / Sound E

- **The different E's:**
- The ***unaccented e*** – sounds like *er* in 'her'
- The ***é aigu*** (acute) – sounds like *ay* in 'say'
- The ***è grave*** – sounds like *ai* in 'fair'
- The ***circumflex (ê)*** or *l'accent circonflexe* which can be found in any vowel.

É (e aigu) / È (e grave)

- **É:** *ay*
  Occupé (occupied), region.
- **È:** *ai* as in *air*
  Père (father), règle (rule).

Can you think of other words like this?

Letter / Sound I

I is the easiest French vowel. It sounds exactly like “ee” in English most of the time.

- **Pronounced *ee*:**
  il (he), billet (ticket), vie (life), Samedi (Saturday).

- **Followed by *n*:**
  matin (morning), fin (end), vin (wine).

Letter / Sound O

These are the common sounds of *O* in French:

- ***O*** **as in *spot*:**
  Donner (to give), mort (dead).
- ***O*** **as in *oh*:**
  Mot (word), poser (to put).

Letter / Sound U

There’s no equivalent to an English sound for this, here’s the most common pronunciation of *U:*

Du (of the), sucre (sugar), mûr (wall).

- **U followed by *n*:**
  lundi (Monday), brun (brown).

Letter / Sound Y

It normally has the sound of the French *I*:

style, pays (country), cycle.

- **Y between vowels:**
  asseyant (sit conjugated), appuyais (to lean conjugated).

Vowel combinations

- **AI, *e* as in *set*:**
  mais (but), lait (milk).
- **AI followed by *n*:**
  pain (bread), copain (boyfriend).
- **AU, *o* as in *gosh*:**
  gauche (left).

Vowel combinations

***EU*, sounds like *euh*:**

peu (little), deux (two).

***EAU*, sounds like *oh*:**

eau (water), beau (beautiful), chapeau (hat), bureau (office).

Consonant sounds

Consonants generally have the same sounds in both English and French when pronounced within a word. Occasionally, two letters share identical sounds, while in other cases, a single letter can have dual pronunciations. Furthermore, there exists a unique scenario where a letter is consistently silent!

Letter / Sound C

- **Pronounced as *k* as in *keen,*** when it is followed by *a, o or u* :

  cadeau (gift), couteau (knife), cumin.

- When a cedilla *Ç* is added to the c, **it will sound like *s in sit* :**

  ça (that), garçon (boy), déçu (disappointed).

Letter / Sound C

- **As the first sound in ceiling** when it is followed by *e, i or y*:
  séance (session), citron (lemon), cyprès.

- ***ch,* sounds *sh* as in *shop***:
  chemise (shirt), mouchoir (tissue).

Letter / Sound S

- ***Z*** **as in** ***zoo*** when it is *between vowels* :

  heureuse (happy), oiseau (bird).

- ***S*** **as in** ***sit*** when it *isn't* :

  cassé (broken), sauce, désastre (disaster).

Letter / Sound G

- ***G*** **as in** ***gate*** when it is followed by *a, o or u:*

  gaz (gas), éggouter (to dry), aigu (acute).
- ***S*** **as in** ***leisure*** when it is followed by *e, i or y:*

  juge (judge), gilet (cardigan), gym.
- ***Ni*** **as in** ***onion*** when is combined with *n (gn):*

  oignon, campagne (countryside).

Letter / Sound J, Q, LL

- ***J*** **sounds like the** ***S*** **in** ***leisure*** **:**

  jeter (to throw), Jules.

- ***Q*** when combined as ***"qu"***, **sounds like the** ***k*** **in** ***keen*** **:**

  chaque (each), question.

- ***LL*** **sounds as** ***y*** **in** ***yes*** **:**

  fille (daughter), paille (straw).

Letter / Sound T

- Normally, **it sounds like *t* as in *take***, when in the form *"th"*:

  maths, thermostat, théâtre.

- **It sounds like *s* as in *sit***, when in the form *"-tion"*:

  natation (swimming), national.

Letter / Sound H

When it begins a word, the *H* can be:

- ***Silent*** :
  l'homme (the man), l'hôtel.
- ***Aspirate*** :
  les haricots (the beans), le hall.

Letter / Sound H

When the h is aspirate, no liaison is made :

Haine (hatred)	Hardi (bold)	Héros (hero)
Haïr (to hate)	Haricot (bean)	Hibou (owl)
Halle (hangar)	Hasard (chance)	Hors (outside)
Hangar	Honte (shame)	Hurler (to howl)

Letter / Sound R

A raspy sound in the back of the throat:

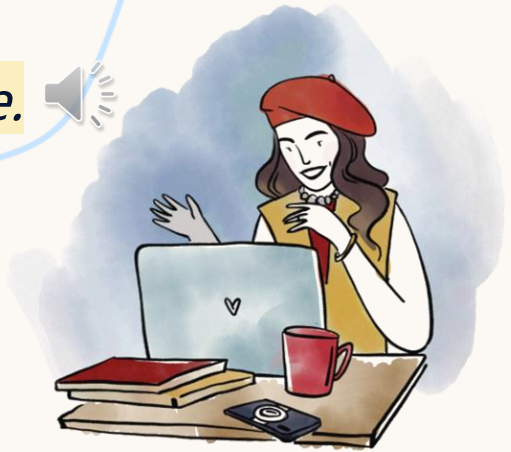
Rue (street), rouge (red), rare.

Pro Tip!

Silent letters

The final consonant is generally not pronounced. Unless it’s followed by an e, for example in the feminine form of the adjective:

- *Vert (green), grand (tall), petit (small), and ouvert (open).*
- *Verte, grande, petite, and ouverte.*



Pro Tip!

Silent letters

Letters **C, F, L, and R**, are exceptions to the *silent letter* rule.

Example:

Hotel - *Professeur*

Nasal sounds

What are French nasal sounds?

It’s a distinctive feature of French, produced by blocking air from leaving the mouth instead of releasing it through the nose while the vocal cords vibrate.

*Try saying the words **sing, sang, song** and **sung** and notice the following:*

- *The “g” is given very little value in the standard pronunciation*
- *As you pronounce the words, air is blocked when the back of your tongue presses against the soft palate.*

The French nasal sounds

Nasal sound	Pronunciation	Example
Om, on	*ong* as in “song”	nom (name), non (no)
Um, un	*ung* as in “sung”	Un (one), brun (Brown)
Am, an, em, en	*ahng*	Champ (field), temps (time)
Im, in, aim, ain, ein	*ang* as in “sang”	Vin (wine), plein (full)
Ien	*ee-ang*	Bien (well)

The French-y Traps

The French-y traps

Now read up carefully because this here is where non-French speakers often get in trouble.

Listed below are some pronunciations for syllables that, when spoken, differ quite well from how it is spoken in English.

The French-y traps

Syllable	Pronunciation	Example
er	*ay* when at the end of a word with 2+ syllables	Parler (to speak)
ez	At the end of a word: *ay*	Nez (nose)
ail	At the end of a word: *ah-ee*	Travail (job)
eil, eille	*a-ee*	Soleil (sun), bouteille (bottle)
ill	*ee-y*	Billet (ticket)
gn	*ni* as in “onion”	Signal

The French-y traps

- **er** (when at the end of a word with two or more syllables) and **ez** are both pronounced like '***ay***'.
- As an exception to the C,F,L,R pronunciation rule presented earlier, ***L*** when used in the syllables **ail** and **eil**, are generally silent.
- For sure you're quite familiar with the ***gn*** sound already. *Especially if you're the lasa**gn**a-eating type.*

Why all the words seem linked to each other

This melody of the continuous nature of French arises from a simple rule:

> *When a word ending in a **consonant** is followed by a word beginning with **a vowel** or a silent 'H', **the consonant links to the beginning of the second word.***

Examples :

- Nou**s** **a**vons *(pronounced noo zah-vong, meaning 'we have')*
- Un peti**t** **e**nfant *(pronounced ung p'tee tahng-fahng, meaning 'a small child').*

Combinations guidelines

Letters	Sound	Example	Pronunciation
s, x	Sounds like *z*	deux ans (two years)	der zahng
d	Sounds like *t*	un grand arbre (a tall tree)	ung grahng tabhbr
f	Sounds like *v*	Neuf heures (nine hours)	ner verr

French and English similarities

Contrary to popular belief, many syllables are pronounced as though they are a part of an English word, and are each given an equal stress.

- ***Zh*** sounds like *s* in *'measure'*.
- ***ü*** no equivalent in English; round your lips and say *'ee'.*
- **O** sounds like *o* in *'not'*.
- **Oh** sounds like *o* in *'note'*.

Punctuation marks

Common punctuation marks

Le point (.)	The period
La virgule (,)	The comma
Le point et virgule (;)	The semicolon
Les deux points (:)	The colon
Le tiret (-)	The dash
Les guillemets (« »)	The quotation marks
Le point d'interrogation (?)	The question mark
Le point d'exclamation (!)	The exclamation mark

Le cedille (ç)

The cedilla (**ç**) or *la cédille* which can be found only underneath the letter **c;** the (**ç**) is pronounced as a soft ***s.***

In the word *garçon* (boy), the ***c*** precedes an ***o*** which means it should be pronounced as a hard ***c*** like in '*car*', but the cedilla softens the letter to make it sound like ***s*** as in '*sit*'.

Example:

garçon (boy), façade, grinçant (squeaking), leçon (lesson).

Accents and meaning

Accent marks can be used to differentiate between similarly spelled words which have different meanings.

Examples:

- **La** (the) vs **là** (there)
- **Ou** (or) vs **où** (where)
- **Sur** (on) vs **sûr** (sure)

Let’s Practice!

Pronounce the following words to practice vowel sounds

Open A

Ami (friend)

Malle (trunk)

Malade (sick)

Page

Table

La (the)

Closed A

Âme (soul)

Bâtir (to build)

Base

Classe

Pas (not)

Chat (cat)

E aigu

Été (summer)

Céda (to yield)

Café

Bébé (baby)

Créer (to create)

École (school)

È & Ê

Lève (to raise)

Père (father)

Frère (brother)

Tête (head)

Fête (party)

Crème (cream)

E

Tel (such)

Mer (sea)

Cadet

Femme (woman)

Pied (foot)

Fenêtre (window)

Mute E

Malle

Apporte (bring)

Table

Samedi

(Saturday)

Rue (street)

Livre (book)

I

Il (he)

Île (island)

Midi (noon)

Idée (idea)

Insecte

Itinéraire

Ô

Côte (coast)

Nôtre (ours)

Pôle

Rôti (roast)

Cône

O

Mot (word)

Opéra

Ordinateur (computer)

Robe

Notre (our)

Orange

U

Sucre (sugar)

Mûr (wall)

Université

Unique

Utile

Uniforme

Y

Asseyant

Appuyai

Pays (country)

Cycle

Yacht

AI

Parlais (speak)

Chaise (chair)

Quai (platform)

Vrai (truth)

Mais (but)

Aimer (to love)

AU

Autre (other)

Chaud (hot)

Beau

Auteur (author)

Aube (dawn)

Aurore

EI

Reine (queen)

Seine

Seize (sixteen)

Veine

Peinture (paint)

Peine (pain)

EU

Feu (fire)

Veux (want)

Peur (fear)

Heureux (happy)

Neuf (nine)

Sœur (sister)

OU

Tour

Goût (taste)

Outil (tool)

Boucle (loop)

Jouer (to play)

Rouge (red)

Pronounce the following words to practice consonant sounds

C

Chien (dog)

Cheval (horse)

Couleur (color)

Café

Ciel (sky)

Ciseaux (scissors)

S

Chanson (song)

Soleil (sun)

Sable (sand)

Serpent

Raison (reason)

Rose

G

Gare (station)

Gagner (to win)

Genre

Génial (great)

Guitare

Girafe

J

Jardin (garden)

Jouer (to play)

Jeune (young)

Jupe (skirt)

Jambe (leg)

Joli (pretty)

Q

Question

Quoi (what)

Quitter (to quit)

Queue

Quatre (four)

Quiche

LL

Famille

Grille (grid)

Aller (to go)

Fouiller (to search)

Fille (girl)

Bouillir (to boil)

T

Thé (tea)

Thon (tuna)

Motivation

Nation

Tarte (tart)

Télévision

R

Riz (rice)

Rouge (red)

Renard (fox)

Arbre (tree)

Miroir (mirror)

Sourire (smile)

H aspiré

Homme (man)

Heure (hour)

Hôpital

Hiver (winter)

Haricot (bean)

Hache (ax)

H muet

Herbe

Honneur

(honor)

Habit

Haut (high)

Humer (to sniff)

Hélicoptère