



FRENCH · LEVEL 2

Lesson 2

The compound past: auxiliaries, past participles
and agreement — with corrected exercises

● Auxiliaries

● Participles

● Agreement

● Double auxiliary

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INTRODUCTION

The tense you tell stories in

The **passé composé** is the tense French uses to say what happened. It covers both of your English pasts at once: *j'ai mangé* means “I ate” **and** “I have eaten”. French makes no distinction — which is one thing less to worry about.

It is called “compound” because it is built from **two parts**: an auxiliary (*avoir* or *être*) plus a past participle. And here lies the decisive difference with English: **English uses only “have”; French uses two auxiliaries**. Choosing the wrong one is the most common mistake English speakers make.

This lesson takes the three questions in order: how the participle is formed, which auxiliary each verb takes, and when agreement applies. Corrected exercises close the lesson.

Chapter 1 — How it is formed

Chapter 2 — With the auxiliary AVOIR

Chapter 3 — With the auxiliary ÊTRE

Chapter 4 — Verbs with two auxiliaries

Chapter 5 — Exercises

Lesson 1 is a prerequisite: the present tense of *avoir* and *être* must be solid.

CHAPTER 1

How it is formed

Two parts, always in the same order: auxiliary in the present, followed by the past participle. Once the shape is clear, what remains is learning the participles.

1 The formula: auxiliary + participle

avoir or **être** in the present + **past participle**. *J'ai mangé* — I ate / I have eaten · *Je suis allé* — I went / I have gone · *Nous avons attendu* — we waited.

The essentials : One French tense covers both English pasts. That simplifies things — right up until you have to pick the auxiliary.

2 First group: participle in -É

Every **-ER** verb forms its participle in **-é**: *parler* → *parlé*, *étudier* → *étudié*, *manger* → *mangé*. This is the largest and easiest group.

Example : *J'ai étudié le français pendant 5 ans* — I studied French for five years.

3 Second group: participle in -I

Second-group **-IR** verbs give a participle in **-i**: *finir* → *fini*, *choisir* → *choisi*, *réussir* → *réussi*.

Example : *J'ai fini mon travail* — I finished my work · *Elle a réussi son examen* — she passed her exam.

4 Third group: learned by heart

No rule here, but recurring endings: **-U** (*attendre* → *attendu*, *vouloir* → *voulu*, *devoir* → *dû*, *avoir* → *eu*) · **-IS** (*prendre* → *pris*, *mettre* → *mis*) · **-IT** (*écrire* → *écrit*, *dire* → *dit*).

Good news : English does exactly the same thing — go/gone, write/written, take/taken. Irregular participles are familiar territory.

5 The negation wraps the auxiliary

ne ... pas encloses the **auxiliary**, not the participle: *Je n'ai pas mangé* · *Il n'est pas venu*. Same position as your “have not eaten”.

Careful : Classic error: “je n'ai mangé pas”. The participle always comes after *pas*.

The participles to learn first

être → été · avoir → eu · faire → fait · aller → allé · venir → venu · voir → vu

prendre → pris · mettre → mis · dire → dit · écrire → écrit · vouloir → voulu · devoir → dû

pouvoir → pu · savoir → su · boire → bu · lire → lu · connaître → connu · attendre → attendu

Eighteen participles cover most of spoken French.

What really matters

- Passé composé = auxiliary in the present + past participle.
- One French tense covers both “I ate” and “I have eaten”.
- The negation wraps the auxiliary, never the participle.

CHAPTER 2

With the auxiliary AVOIR

The default case, and the one that will feel natural: it works exactly like your English “have”. The vast majority of French verbs behave this way.

1 The conjugation

*J'ai parlé · Tu **as** parlé · Il / Elle **a** parlé · Nous **avons** parlé · Vous **avez** parlé · Ils / Elles **ont** parlé.*

Familiar ground : The participle never changes with the subject: *elle a parlé*, never “*elle a parlée*”. Just like “she has spoken”.

2 All transitive verbs

Verbs taking a direct object use *avoir*: *J'ai mangé une pizza · Nous avons attendu le bus · Elle a écrit une lettre · Ils ont vu le film.*

Examples : *J'ai eu des invités* — I had guests · *J'ai préparé une pizza pour le dîner.*

3 Modal and opinion verbs

vouloir, pouvoir, devoir, savoir, croire, penser — all with *avoir*: *J'ai voulu · Tu as pu · Il a dû · Nous avons su.*

Examples : *Elles n'ont pas voulu de stagiaires parce qu'elles n'ont pas d'argent.*

4 Even avoir and être themselves

Odd but logical: *avoir* and *être* both form their passé composé with **avoir**. *J'ai eu* — I had · *J'ai été* — I was.

It matches : Your English instinct is right here: “I have had”, “I have been” — also with have.

5 One agreement exception

With *avoir* the participle stays invariable... unless the direct object comes **before** the verb: *La lettre que j'ai écrite* · *Les livres que j'ai lus*.

For later : At A2 level this rule appears rarely. Note it, but don't apply it everywhere.

Examples from the lesson

J'ai attendu pendant une heure devant le théâtre. — I waited an hour outside the theatre.

Il a dû sortir sous la pluie. — He had to go out in the rain.

J'ai rangé mon portefeuille. — I put my wallet away.

With avoir the participle stays put: this is the easy case.

What really matters

- Avoir is the default, and it works like your English “have”.
- With avoir the participle does not agree with the subject.
- avoir and être form their own passé composé with avoir.

CHAPTER 3

With the auxiliary ÊTRE

This is where French parts company with English. Where you always say “I have gone, I have left, I got up” with have, French switches auxiliary — and then makes the participle agree.

1 The conjugation

*Je **suis** allé(e) · Tu **es** allé(e) · Il **est** allé / Elle **est** allée · Nous **sommes** allé(e)s · Vous **êtes** allé(e)s · Ils **sont** allés / Elles **sont** allées.*

The error to avoid : Never translate “I have gone” as “j’ai allé”. It is the single most common English-speaker mistake in French.

2 Verbs of movement and change of state

aller · venir · arriver · partir · entrer / sortir · monter / descendre · rester · tomber · naître · mourir · devenir.

Examples : *Ils sont restés une nuit chez moi — they stayed one night at my place · Elle est devenue docteur.*

3 All reflexive verbs

Without exception: *se lever, s’appeler, s’asseoir, se plaire. Je me **suis** assise sur le banc · L’histoire s’**est** déroulée à Sofia.*

Key difference : English has no reflexive here at all — “I got up”. French needs both the particle and être: *je me suis levé.*

4 Agreement is compulsory

The participle takes an adjective-style ending: **-e** feminine, **-s** plural, **-es** feminine plural. *Il est allé · Elle est allée · Ils sont allés · Elles sont allées*.

New territory : English has no equivalent whatsoever: this is a genuinely new habit and it needs written practice.

5 A trick to remember it

Almost every être verb expresses **movement through space** or a **change of state**: going, coming, entering, leaving, going up, going down, being born, dying, becoming.

The reflex : If the verb says where you go or what you turn into — it probably takes être.

The two conjugations side by side

With AVOIR — no agreement: *Elle a mangé · Elles ont mangé · Il a attendu*

With ÊTRE — agreement: *Elle est allée · Elles sont allées · Il est venu*

Reflexives always with être: *Je me suis levé(e) · Nous nous sommes rencontrés*

The auxiliary decides whether agreement happens: that's why it's learned with the verb.

What really matters

- French uses two auxiliaries where English uses only “have”.
- Être covers movement, change of state and every reflexive verb.
- Never say j'ai allé or j'ai levé: it is je suis allé and je me suis levé.

CHAPTER 4

Verbs with two auxiliaries

A few verbs take both auxiliaries — and the meaning changes with the choice. This is the nuance that separates a confident speaker from a beginner.

1 SORTIR — to go out or to take out

*Je **suis** sorti* — I went out · *J'**ai** sorti la poubelle* — I took the bin out · *J'**ai** sorti le fromage du frigo* — I took the cheese out of the fridge.

The rule : The rule: if the verb has a **direct object**, the auxiliary is *avoir*. If it has none — *être*.

2 MONTER and DESCENDRE

*Elle **est** montée au premier étage* — she went up to the first floor · *Elle **a** monté les valises* — she carried the suitcases up. *Je **suis** descendu* · *J'**ai** descendu la poubelle*.

Same logic : English marks the same distinction with different phrasings — French marks it with the auxiliary.

3 PASSER and RETOURNER

*Je **suis** passé devant la boulangerie* — I walked past the bakery · *J'**ai** passé un examen* — I sat an exam. *Il **est** retourné en France* · *Il **a** retourné la crêpe*.

Watch out : False friend: *passer un examen* means to **sit** an exam, not to pass it. To pass is *réussir*.

4 One question settles it

Before choosing, ask: **is there a direct object after the verb?** If yes — *avoir*. If no — *être*, and the participle agrees.

The test : *Elle est sortie* (no object, agreement) versus *Elle a sorti la voiture* (object, invariable).

5 The double meanings make sense

When the verb describes **your own movement** — *être*. When it describes **what you do to something else** — *avoir*. Hence the shift in meaning.

Looking ahead : The same logic applies to *rentrer*, *entrer* and others you'll meet later.

Quick reference table

Je suis sorti — I went out · *J'ai sorti la poubelle* — I took the bin out

Elle est montée — she went up · *Elle a monté les valises* — she carried the cases up

Je suis passé — I passed by · *J'ai passé un examen* — I sat an exam

Il est retourné — he went back · *Il a retourné la crêpe* — he flipped the pancake

One question: is there an object? Yes → avoir. No → être.

What really matters

- Sortir, monter, descendre, passer and retourner take both auxiliaries.
- Direct object → avoir. No object → être, with agreement.
- The meaning shifts: your own movement (*être*) versus acting on something (*avoir*).

CHAPTER 5

Exercises

Do them once without looking at the answers. Auxiliary choice and agreement are learned by writing, not by reading.

1 Give the past participle

1. parler 2. finir 3. attendre 4. prendre 5. écrire 6. vouloir 7. être
8. faire

Answers : 1. parlé · 2. fini · 3. attendu · 4. pris · 5. écrit · 6. voulu · 7. été · 8. fait

2 AVOIR or ÊTRE?

1. Je ___ mangé une pizza. 2. Elle ___ allée à Paris. 3. Nous ___ attendu le bus. 4. Ils ___ restés chez moi. 5. Tu ___ levé tôt (se lever).

Answers : 1. ai · 2. est · 3. avons · 4. sont · 5. t'es (reflexive → être)

3 Make the participle agree where needed

1. Elle est allée___ au cinéma. 2. Elles ont mangé___ . 3. Ils sont venu___ hier. 4. Marie s'est assis___ . 5. Nous avons attendu___ .

Answers : 1. allée · 2. mangé (no agreement with avoir) · 3. venus · 4. assise · 5. attendu (invariable)

4 Choose the auxiliary by meaning

1. Je ____ sorti la poubelle. 2. Je ____ sorti avec mes amis. 3. Elle ____ monté les valises. 4. Elle ____ montée au deuxième étage.

Answers : 1. ai (object present) · 2. suis (no object) · 3. a · 4. est (+ agreement)

5 Translate into French

1. I ate a pizza. 2. She went to Paris. 3. We didn't wait. 4. I got up early. 5. He had to go out.

Answers : 1. J'ai mangé une pizza. · 2. Elle est allée à Paris. · 3. Nous n'avons pas attendu. · 4. Je me suis levé(e) tôt. · 5. Il a dû sortir.

How to work through this lesson

Day 1: read the lesson and do the exercises without looking at the answers.

Day 3: redo exercises 2 and 3 — auxiliary and agreement need repetition.

Day 7: write about your day yesterday in five sentences, all in the passé composé.

Writing is essential here: agreement only becomes visible on paper.

What really matters

- Participles are learned by heart: there is no shortcut for the third group.
- The auxiliary is learned together with the verb, never separately.
- Recounting yesterday is the best practical test of this lesson.

CONCLUSION

What you can do now

What you can do now

- ☐ Form the passé composé of any regular verb
- ☐ Recognize the participles of all three groups and the eighteen most common irregulars
- ☐ Choose between avoir and être according to the verb
- ☐ Make the participle agree with the subject when the auxiliary is être
- ☐ Tell apart the double verbs: I went out versus I took the bin out

To practise this week

- ☐ Write about your day yesterday in five sentences — on paper, then aloud
- ☐ Redo exercises 2 and 3 without looking at the answers
- ☐ Make a list of the participles of the verbs you use most

What comes next

- ☐ Lesson 3: the imparfait and how it differs from the passé composé
- ☐ The cheat sheets download separately from domaformalis.com

The five things not to forget

1. Passé composé = avoir or être in the present + past participle.
2. French uses two auxiliaries where English uses only “have”.
3. Être covers movement, change of state and every reflexive verb.
4. Agreement happens only with être: allé, allée, allés, allées.
5. Is there a direct object? Yes → avoir. No → être.

These five points cover nearly every case you will meet.

This lesson follows and expands the course of Yasmine, a French and Spanish teacher based in Sofia. The explanations are organised by auxiliary and completed with corrected exercises so the lesson can be worked through independently.

To go further, find the **cheat sheets** on Domaformalis, and get in touch if you'd like live lessons with a teacher.

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