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Chapter 6: VERBS

When you look up a verb in the dictionary, it is given to you in the **infinitive**, meaning the most basic form of the verb before anything is done to it. In English, infinitives are the **to** form of the verb, e.g. *to play*.

The infinitive in French can be used in a sentence but it will nearly always be with another verb, e.g. *je vais jouer* = I am going *to play*.

It is also used to express the *–ing* form of an English verb, when that *–ing* form has the meaning of *to*, e.g. *I like playing (= to play) football = j’aime jouer au football*.

All infinitives in French end in ER, IR or RE. This is an obvious way of grouping them, which is why you have three families of verbs: the **ER verbs**, the **IR verbs** and the **RE verbs**. Of these three families, the ER verb family is by far the biggest. The majority of ER verbs are **regular verbs**.

Regular verbs, from the word *règle* meaning rule, are well-behaved verbs that follow the same rules. Once you learn a rule, all regular verbs will follow it, enabling you to use verbs you may not have known before.

But of course, in every good family, there is a black sheep or two. French verb families have their black sheep too; they are called **irregular verbs**. In other words, they do not follow rules. With them, all bets are off. You therefore have to **learn** how they behave in the present tense, the passé composé etc on a case by case basis.

The most useful irregular verbs to know are:

- **avoir** = to have
- **être** = to be
- **aller** = to go
- **faire** = to do or to make
- **prendre** = to take

You can call these the **Famous Five** (*Le Club Des Cinq* in French!).

**Tenses**

A verb will change according to the **subject** used but also according to the **tense** you’re using, i.e. a verb in the future (*je jouerai* = I will play) does not look like a verb in the past (*je jouais - I used to play*) - how else would we know which is which?!
A quick overview of essential tenses

Example: jouer with je as the subject:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gone By</th>
<th>Now or Regularly</th>
<th>Yet to Come</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passé Composé</td>
<td>Present tense</td>
<td>Present with context</td>
<td>Conditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-What happened</td>
<td>-What happens</td>
<td>e.g. je joue demain</td>
<td>-What would happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. j’ai joué</td>
<td>-What is happening</td>
<td>e.g. je joue</td>
<td>e.g. je jouerai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperfect</td>
<td></td>
<td>Future</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-How it was</td>
<td></td>
<td>-What will happen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-What was happening</td>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. je jouerai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Used to happen</td>
<td></td>
<td>Immediate Future</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. je jouais</td>
<td></td>
<td>-What is going to happen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate Past</td>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. je vais jouer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-What just happened</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. je viens de jouer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Present Tense

You use the present tense to say how things are, e.g. I am tall; she is Irish.
You also use the present tense to say what you do regularly and what you’re doing right now. In English, there are two different way of spelling your verb. In French, there is only one:

- *I do* French in school = je fais du français à l’école
- *I’m doing* French at the moment = je fais du français en ce moment

You have to say do.
This applies to all verbs, not just faire, e.g. she sings or she is singing = elle chante.

The present tense is also used in phrases with depuis (since/for).
Example: il travaille ici depuis six mois.
That sentence in English would be he has been working here for six months.

Formation of the Present Tense with Regular Verbs

As regular verbs follow rules, your task can be simplified by learning the rules for each tense. You don’t have to learn each verb individually, like you have to do with irregular verbs.
Here is the rule for putting a regular verb in the present tense:

1. Remove the ER, IR or RE from the infinitive. This gives you the stem. You will have to add endings to the stem.
2. Add the correct ending to the stem, according to the grid on the top of the next page:
For **ER** verbs, add:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For je</th>
<th>For tu</th>
<th>For il; elle; ce; ça; on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>es</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For **IR** verbs, add:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For je</th>
<th>For tu</th>
<th>For il; elle; ce; ça; on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>is</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For **RE** verbs, add:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For je</th>
<th>For tu</th>
<th>For il; elle; ce; ça; on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>(nothing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Example:

You want to say *my sisters like pop music*. First, identify *to like* in French. That’s *aimer*, which is a regular ER verb. The pronoun you use to replace *my sisters* with is *they*, feminine, i.e. *elles*.

Now, apply the rule:

Remove the ER from *aimer*. This gives you the stem **aim-**

Check the grid. You need the first column, as it deals with ER verbs.

1. Read down through the list of persons until you find *elles*.
2. You need to add **–ent** to the stem.

→ *mes sœurs aim- + –ent* la musique pop = *mes sœurs aiment la musique pop.*

**Examples:** *je regarde; tu choisis; elle attend; nous vendons; vous adorez; ils grandissent*

### A few spelling exceptions

1. When the verb ends in **–ger**, the *nous* form ending is **–eons**, e.g. *nous mangeons*. That’s to keep the soft sound of that **g**.

   The letter **g** is *hard* when it is followed by **a, o or u**, e.g. *le golf, la gare* and *soft* when followed by **e** or **i**. That’s why there is a **u** in words like *guitar, la guitare*. It would begin like *giraffe* otherwise.

2. For the same reason, verbs ending in **–cer** keep that soft **s** sound by using a **ç** in front of the **–ons** ending, e.g. *nous commençons*.

3. Verbs ending in **–yer** only keep that **y** with the *nous* and *vous* forms. All the other persons use **i** instead, e.g. *envoyer* → *j’envoie/tu envoies* but *nous envoyons/vous envoyez*.

Some verbs play fast and loose with accents:

Some verbs with no accents in the **infinitive** have them in the **present tense**, but not with each person:

**acheter** → *j’achète, tu achêtes, il achète; nous achetons; vous achetez; ils achètent*

**se lever** → *je me lève; tu te lèves; il se lève; nous nous levons; vous vous levez; ils se lèvent*

Verbs with acute accents in the infinitive don’t always keep those accents **acute**:

**préférer** → *je préfère; tu préfères; il préfère; nous préférons; vous préférez; ils préfèrent*
Irregular verbs: The Famous Five in the present tense

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AVOIR</th>
<th>ETRE</th>
<th>ALLER</th>
<th>FAIRE</th>
<th>PRENDRE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>je or</td>
<td>ai</td>
<td>suis</td>
<td>vais</td>
<td>fais</td>
<td>prends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tu</td>
<td>as</td>
<td>es</td>
<td>vas</td>
<td>fais</td>
<td>prends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>il; elle; ce; ça; on</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>est</td>
<td>va</td>
<td>fait</td>
<td>prend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nous</td>
<td>avons</td>
<td>sommes</td>
<td>allons</td>
<td>faisons</td>
<td>prenons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vous</td>
<td>avez</td>
<td>êtes</td>
<td>allez</td>
<td>faîtes</td>
<td>prenez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ils; elles</td>
<td>ont</td>
<td>sont</td>
<td>vont</td>
<td>font</td>
<td>prennent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples: tu prends; j’ai; ils vont; ça va; nous sommes

**Exercices**

1. Translate the following phrases into French. All the verbs are regular.

(a) She chooses (to choose = choisir) ________________________________________

(b) We’re playing (to play = jouer) – Give two ways of saying this. ______________

(c) The boys are singing (to sing = chanter) ________________________________________

(d) Do you like..? (to like = aimer) – use the casual you. ________________________

(e) He waits (to wait = attendre) ________________________________________________

(f) The little girls are growing up (to grow up = grandir) ____________________________

(g) You sell … (to sell = vendre) – use the polite you. _____________________________

(h) I wash (myself) (to wash = se laver)* ________________________________________

*Se laver* is a reflexive verb, like s’appeler. Remember, most reflexive verbs are regular ER verbs. The only difference is the reflexive pronoun that has to be added, e.g. tu te réveilles. See page 22.
2. Match the subject to a suitable irregular verb, then finish the sentence yourself and say what it means, e.g. je + fais du français = I do French/I am doing French.

Paul     vais
Mes amis  est
La souris vas
Elles   prend
Marilyn et moi font
Tu      sont
Toi et ta mère avons
Je      êtes

(a) ________________________________________________________
(b) ________________________________________________________
(c) ________________________________________________________
(d) ________________________________________________________
(e) ________________________________________________________
(f) ________________________________________________________
(g) ________________________________________________________
(h) ________________________________________________________

3. In the following sentences, fill in the gaps with a suitable regular or irregular verb in the present tense. Then translate each sentence into English:

(a) Mes voisins ____________ anglais.
(b) J’ ____________ trois chiens.
(c) Mes stylos ____________ dans ma trousse.
(d) On ____________ du chocolat.
(e) Vous ____________ le bus ?

(a) ________________________________________________________
(b) ________________________________________________________
(c) ________________________________________________________
(d) ________________________________________________________
(e) ________________________________________________________
The Present Participle

First, let’s see what a present participle is in English.
Look at the following example:

John likes playing cards.

There are two words in the verbal group in this sentence: likes + playing.
These two verbs have different meanings and the second verb ends in -ing. This second verb is a present participle in English.

The present participle in English can also be used after prepositions such as by, e.g. By leaving early, we’ll be in Montpellier before twelve.

The present participle in French behaves a bit differently.
In the sentence John likes playing cards, the French use an infinitive, not a present participle, for the second verb, e.g. John likes playing cards = John aime jouer aux cartes.
Basically, if you can replace the verb ending in -ing (e.g. playing) with a verb starting with to... in English, you will use an infinitive in the French translation, e.g. John likes playing/to play = John aime jouer.

However, you need to use a present participle in French when you use a verb with en (= by, on/upon or whilst).

Examples:
Tu réussiras en travaillant dur = You will succeed by working hard.
En arrivant, on a pris le Métro = On arriving, we took the Métro.
Je suis tombé en jouant au hockey = I fell whilst playing hockey.

You can see how the present participle could be really useful (and impressive!) in your written work.

The way to form the present participle is to look at the nous form of any verb in the present tense (ER, IR or RE) and remove the –ons ending. This gives the stem, to which you add –ant.

Example: To translate playing.
we play = nous jouons
Remove the –ons to get the stem → jou-
Add –ant → jou- + -ant = jouant
jouant = playing

(Three exceptions: being = étant; having = ayant; knowing = sachant)
Sometimes, there is a need for the present participle in French, but not in English. English is a wonderfully elastic language where you can say things like, he ran out of the room. The
French language is not so nimble and that sentence in French has to be he went/came out of the room running. To express that, you need the present participle. → il est sorti de la pièce en courant.

In English and in French, the present participle is also used to create adjectives out of verbs, e.g. charming comes from to charm; in French, charmant come from charmer. However, like all adjectives in French, present participles used as adjectives agree with their noun. Example: un film intéressant/une histoire intéressante

Note
Remember that in English, not all verbs ending in -ing are present participles. Look at this example: John is playing cards.
You cannot replace playing with to play in the example.

The verbal group is playing is in the present tense and the sentence translates into French as, John joue aux cartes. You do not translate the is nor the playing seperately.

**EXERCISES**

Translate the following sentences into French:
(a) I saw Marie when on my way (=while going) to school. (to go = aller)
(b) I went in by opening the door. (to open = ouvrir)
(c) I went in shouting. (to shout = crier)
(d) He listens to music whilst waiting for the bus. (to wait for = attendre)
(e) She broke her leg whilst skiing. (to ski = faire du ski)

(a) _____________________________________________________________
(b) _____________________________________________________________
(c) _____________________________________________________________
(d) _____________________________________________________________
(e) _____________________________________________________________

The Passé Composé
Also known as the perfect, the passé composé is the tense you use to say what happened. You use it to talk about something that happened just once in the past (e.g. I went to the cinema, I have eaten an apple), rather than something you regularly used to do in the past.

The passé composé means composed past, so remember you will need to combine TWO words.

The first word of the passé composé is called the auxiliary. It is either avoir or être in their present tense forms.
The second word is called the past participle. It carries all the meaning, as in English. For example, I have done that. 
Have = the auxiliary. Done = the past participle.
In French, you will always need both the auxiliary and the past participle.
First, find out the **infinitive** (= verb itself as in *To do*) of the verb you want to use. Then, you need to find out which **auxiliary** to use, so ask yourself the following questions:

- **Is your infinitive a reflexive verb?** (e.g. se lever)
- **Is your infinitive in this list?**
  - aller = to go
  - venir = to come
  - entrer = to enter/go in
  - rentrer = to go back in/to go home
  - sortir = to go out
  - arriver = to arrive
  - partir = to leave
  - monter = to go up
  - descendre = to go down
  - rester = to stay
  - tomber = to fall
  - retourner = to return
  - naître = to be born
  - mourir = to die

  Note: these verbs can be learned in pairs of opposites (e.g. aller/venir) or remember them with this phrase: Mrs Van Der Tramp (M for Monter, R for retourner, etc…)

- **Is your infinitive neither reflexive nor in the list?**

You will need one of these as your first word (= **auxiliary**):

- (je) suis  
  - (this is the être verb)
- (tu) es
- (il/elle/on) est
- (nous) sommes
- (vous) êtes
- (ils/elles) sont

Note: Don’t forget the reflexive bit, e.g. *je me suis*, if needed.

You will need one of these as your first word (= **auxiliary**):

- (j’) ai  
  - (this is the avoir verb)
- (tu) as
- (il/elle/on) a
- (nous) avons
- (vous) avez
- (ils/elles) ont
Now you need a second word, the **past participle**, so go back to your original verb in the infinitive and ask yourself these questions:

![Diagram]

- **infinitive**
  - Is your verb an ER verb?
  - To get your second word (= past participle), remove the ER at the end of your verb and replace it with é
    - e.g. *jouer* → *joué*
  - Is your verb regular?
    - To get your second word (= past participle), follow this rule:
    - If your verb is a regular IR verb, replace the IR with i
      - e.g. *finir* → *fini*
    - If your verb is a regular RE verb, replace the RE with u
      - e.g. *vendre* → *vendu*
  - Is your verb irregular?
    - If your verb is irregular, you can’t apply any rule. You must learn the list of irregular past participles. Here is a list of common irregular past participles:
      - *bu* = drunk
      - *cru* = believed
      - *couru* = run
      - *dit* = said
      - *dormi* = slept
      - *dû* = had to
      - *eu* = had/got
      - *écrit* = written
      - *été* = been
      - *fait* = done/made
      - *lu* = read
      - *mis* = put
      - *mort* = died / dead
      - *né* = born
      - *ouvert* = opened
      - *parti* = left
      - *pris* = taken
      - *pu* = been able to
      - *reçu* = received
      - *ri* = laughed
      - *sorti* = gone out
      - *vu* = seen
      - *voulu* = wanted
Now, put your first word (auxiliary) and your second word (past participle) together and you have a passé composé.

Example: You want to say I visited the Louvre and I saw the Mona Lisa. First, to visit is visiter and to see is voir. Visiter is not reflexive (it’s not se visiter) and it’s not in the Mrs Van Der Tramp list, so we will need avoir as the auxiliary. The person (i.e. the subject of the verb) you want is I so you look for the je form in the avoir box and you find j’ai. Visiter is an ER verb so you remove the ER and replace it with é, this gives you visité. Put the two together and you get: j’ai visité.

Now, do the same with voir. It’s not reflexive, it’s not in the Mrs Van Der Tramp list so it’s an avoir verb again. You start with j’ai again. Voir, however, is irregular so consult the irregular past participles list. There, you look for seen and you find vu. Put the two together and you get: j’ai vu.

The whole sentence is: J’ai visité le Louvre et j’ai vu la Joconde (la Joconde is what the French call the Mona Lisa.)

One last thing to take into account: if your auxiliary is être, your past participle will have to agree with the subject, i.e. take an e for the feminine singular, s for masculine and mixed plurals and es for feminine plurals.

Example: Julie says je suis allée
   Thomas and Marc say nous sommes allés
   Julie and Marc say nous sommes allés also
   Julie and Florence say nous sommes allées.

When on is used as a casual nous, the past participle also agrees, e.g. on est parti(e)s.

**EXERCISES**

1. Fill in the gaps with the missing auxiliary:
   (a) Tu ______________ regardé la télé hier soir?
   (b) On ______________ partis à huit heures.
   (c) Ils ______________ vu la Joconde au Louvre.
   (d) Je ______________ descendue dans le sud de la France.
   (e) Elle ______________ joué au tennis avec son frère.

2. Fill in the gaps with a suitable past participle:
   (a) Nous avons __________ le film.
   (b) Il est __________ en ville.
   (c) Vous avez __________ une lettre.
   (d) J’ai __________ un garçon sympa en colonie de vacances.
   (e) Elles sont __________ ce matin.
The Imperfect

The expressions in the **imperfect** listed below are the most common. It is worth learning these expressions as you will meet them (and write/say them) yourself.

- **J’étais** = I was;
- **J’avais** = I had/I used to have;
- **C’était** = it was;
- **Il y avait** = there was;
- **Il faisait** = the weather was;
- **Il pleuvait** = it was raining

However, the **imperfect** is the **other** important past tense. Whereas the **passé composé** deals with what happened, the **imperfect** deals with **what was happening, what used to happen** and **how things were**. When it comes to telling a good story about something that has already happened, you will need both tenses.

**How to Form the Imperfect**

The way to form the **imperfect** is to identify the **nous** form of your verb in the **present tense** and remove the–**ons** ending (and the **nous**)!. This gives you the **stem**.

To that stem, you will need to **add the correct ending**. The good news is that you use the same endings for an ER verb, an IR verb or an RE verb.

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For</th>
<th>Add this ending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>je or j’</strong></td>
<td><strong>ais</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>tu</strong></td>
<td><strong>ais</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>il; elle; ce; ça; on</strong></td>
<td><strong>ait</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>nous</strong></td>
<td><strong>ions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>vous</strong></td>
<td><strong>iez</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ils; elles</strong></td>
<td><strong>aient</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```
French Grammar

Examples: You want to say I was watching TV. The verb to watch is regarder. You need we watch to find the stem → nous regardons.
Remove the –ons. This gives the stem regard-
Check the grid for the correct ending. You need the I form, that’s je in French, so the ending is –ais.
Put the two together: je regard- + -ais → je regardais la télé.
You will notice that we did not translate the verb literally. There is no was and no watching. In fact, je regardais could mean I was watching or I used to watch. You need to know the context to know which one it means in English.

If you want to say it was, you need the verb être which has an exceptional stem.
You need to use ét-.
Check the grid for the correct ending. It is ce, so you’ll need the ending –ait.
Put everything together and you get ce + ét- + -ait → c’était. (ce will become c’ because était starts with a vowel)

Examples: j’aimais; tu regardais; vous alliez; ils faisaient

EXERCICES

Put the verbs in brackets into the imperfect:
(a) Ils (aller) souvent au cinéma. _______________
(b) Je (regarder) la télé quand Mathilde est arrivée. ______________
(c) Vous (finir) de manger? _______________
(d) Nous (étudier) le Latin quand j’(être) jeune. Note: the stem of étudier is étudi-,
so yes, you’ll need to write the letter i twice! ______________
(e) Il y (avoir) du brouillard sur la route. ______________

Clash of the Titans: Passé Composé versus Imperfect
The main difficulty with these two past tenses is that they can occur in the same sentence. You need to be careful or your story could be very different to the one you intended to tell!
Compare these two examples:
(a) Le téléphone a sonné quand je prenais un bain.
(b) Le téléphone a sonné quand j’ai pris un bain.
Example (a) means that the phone rang when I was taking a bath. In other words, I was already covered in suds when the phone rang.
Example (b) means that the phone rang when I took a bath. It sounds as if the phone waited for me to get in the bath before ringing!
This shows that you must decide which of the two tenses to use. It all depends on what you mean.
Look at these examples:

(a) il pleuvait = it was raining
(b) il a plu = it rained

In example (a), you're giving more of a description, it implies the rain was falling for a while. In example (b), you're merely stating the fact that it rained, you're not passing judgement. In most cases, there will be a clear choice to make between the two tenses.

To help you with that, have a look at the following checklist:

A
Are you being **factual**, **objective**, and saying **merely what happened**? That's the **passé composé**, e.g. Je suis allé en ville: I went into town

B
Are you referring to a **once-off event in the past**? That's also the **passé composé**, e.g. J'ai rencontré le Président: I met the President

C
Are you **setting the scene** by saying **what you were doing** when something else happened? That's the **imperfect**, e.g. Je regardais la télé quand tu es arrivé: I was watching TV when you arrived

D
Are you referring to something you **used to do**, concentrating on the length or the **repetitive aspect** of the action and not just the fact that you did it? That's the **imperfect**, e.g. J'aimais bien ce groupe mais plus maintenant: I used to like this band but not anymore

E
Are you offering an **opinion** or a **description**, in other words, are you being **subjective**? That's the **imperfect**, too, e.g. C'était super, il y avait plein de choses à faire: It was brilliant, there was lots to do

F
For these reasons, the **passé composé** carries a story forward but the **imperfect** doesn't, e.g. il faisait beau (imperfect), j'ai fait une promenade (passé composé): the weather was good (the story is static), I went for a walk (the story moves forward). You can think of it as a film: the **imperfect** is everything in the background, the **passé composé** is the action.
Here are two stories told using both the passé composé and the imperfect. The first one clearly illustrates the contrast between what used to be the case and what happened next:

**Story 1**

Quand j’étais plus jeune, j’habitais en Angleterre. Mon père travaillait pour une compagnie anglaise. On avait un appartement à Londres, c’était chouette! Il y a trois ans, on a déménagé et on est venus habiter ici. On a acheté une grande maison à la campagne et ça, c’est bien aussi!

**Translation**

When I was younger, I used to live in England. My father was working for an English company. We had/used to have an apartment in London, it was great! Three years ago, we moved and we came to live here. We bought a big house in the country and that’s great too!

- J’étais = I was
  J’ai été = I have been would not work here as it does not make sense to say I have been young.
  (Note: Generally speaking, être is more likely to be used in the imperfect than in the passé composé.)
- J’habitais en… = I lived in …/I used to live in …
  In this case, we are setting the scene so I used to live (i.e. the imperfect) is the best translation as it implies that it was something you did for a while (i.e. you lived there for a while). I lived can be translated from English into French as j’ai habité if you want to state the fact that at one time, you lived in .. (e.g. I have lived in many different countries).
- Mon père travaillait = My father used to work/was working
  We’re still setting the scene so we’re using the imperfect. It’s an explanation as to why they lived in England. Mon père a travaillé would not be right here as it would mean my father has worked.
- On avait = We had/we used to have
  If the verb phrase on a eu had been used, it would actually change the story because avoir in the passé composé is more likely to mean to get than to have, i.e. on a eu = we got. So on avait is the imperfect.
- C’était = it was
  This is one of the useful phrases in the imperfect given to you at the beginning of this section. It’s used to give all kinds of opinions, e.g. c’était nul = it was rubbish, and other bits of background information, e.g. c’était l’hiver = it was winter. It’s the past version of c’est, so it is very useful. Less useful, but still an option, is the phrase ça a été = it has been.
- On a déménagé = We moved (house)
  This is the passé composé because we’re now talking about what happened, i.e something that happened once. As the house move happened once and was a completed action, on déménageait (imperfect) would not work here as it means either we were moving or we used to move.
- On est venus = We came
  Again, this is what happened just once. It doesn’t suit the story to say on venait = we were coming/we used to come. Passé composé
- On a acheté = We bought
  This is clearly a once-off event that happened in the past, so it has to be passé composé. On achetaient imperfect means we used to buy or we were buying, neither of which suits our story.
Here is another story in which the two tenses mix more freely:

**Story 2**

Samedi dernier, j’étais en ville pour faire quelques courses quand tout à coup, j’ai entendu une femme crier « Au voleur! Il m’a volé mon sac! » J’ai vu un jeune homme qui s’enfuyait. Il était grand et il courait vite. À un moment donné, un homme, qui avait de bons réflexes, lui a fait un croche-pied et le voleur est tombé par terre. Il s’est relevé très vite et il est reparti en laissant le sac derrière lui. La dame était très contente de retrouver son sac parce qu’il avait tous ses papiers et ses cartes bancaires dedans. Le voleur, lui, n’a pas été retrouvé!

**Translation**

Last Saturday, I was in town to do some shopping when suddenly, I heard a woman scream ‘Stop, thief! He stole my bag!’ I saw a young man who was running away. He was tall and he was running fast. At one point, a man who had good reflexes tripped him up and the robber fell to the ground. He got back up quickly and he set off again leaving the bag behind. The lady was very happy to get her bag back because she had (there was) all her papers and bank cards inside. (As for) the robber, he has not been found again!

- J’étais = I was    We’re setting the scene. **Imperfect**

- J’ai entendu = I heard    This is a once-off event in the past, we’re saying simply what happened. So that’s **passé composé**.

- J’ai vu = I saw    This is a once-off event in the past, it’s what happened. Again, that’s **passé composé**.

- (qui) s’enfuyait = (who) was running away
  This says that the young man had probably started running before our writer saw him and kept running (until he was tripped up in fact!). **Imperfect** If you say j’ai vu un jeune homme qui s’est enfui, you’re saying I saw a young man who ran away. This sounds as if he ran away as soon as you looked at him. This does not have the same meaning as I saw a young man who was running away.

- Il était = he was    You can’t really say he has been tall, (il a été), can you?! **Imperfect**

- Il courait = he was running    Again, that’s part of the description. We’re not saying he ran (il a couru). **Imperfect**

- (qui) avait = (who) had    That’s another description. Descriptions require the **imperfect**.

- (un homme) a fait = (a man) did (faire un croche-pied à quelqu’un = to trip somebody up)
  This is, luckily perhaps for the young man, a once-off event in the past, we’re stating what happened. A one-off event = the **passé composé**.

- Le voleur est tombé = the robber fell/ il s’est relevé = he got back up again/ il est reparti = he set off again
  All these relate what happened. **Passé composé** (Note: Adding re- to the start of a verb can give the meaning of again, e.g. partir → repartir; commencer → recommencer)
French Grammar

- La dame était = the lady was  This is a description. **Imperfect**
  
  Note the two words used in the extract to refer to the poor victim: la femme = the woman; 
  
  la dame = the woman/the lady, a bit more friendly than la femme.

- Il y avait = there was
  
  This is another of the essential expressions in the **Imperfect**. You use it to describe plenty of things, 
  e.g. il y avait du vent = it was windy (there was a lot of wind); il y avait beaucoup de monde au concert 
  = the concert was packed (there were a lot of people at the concert).

- Le voleur n’â pas été retrouvé = the robber was not found again 
  
  We’re stating a fact, here. **Passé composé**
  
  Note the structures used: as you can see, it’s in the negative, using ne and pas. To say he has been 
  found, you’d write il a été retrouvé. But look more closely and you’ll see that there are three words used 
  for this passé composé. That’s because the phrase is in the passive voice. The passive voice in French 
  is formed much like in English: the verb être is used in various tenses, with a past participle, e.g. elle 
  sera invitée = she will be invited.

**Exercices**

1. Choose between the **passé composé** and the **imperfect** in the following sentences and explain your choice.

  (a)  J’ai vu/Je voyais un bon film hier soir. _____________________________

  (b) On est allés à la plage mais il a plu/il pleuvait. ______________________

  (c) Avant, ils ont joué/ils jouaient au rugby, mais ils ont arrêté/ils arrêtaient. 

  (d) Tu as été/Tu étais malade ? _______________________________________

  (e) Il y a eu/il y avait un accident sur l’autoroute A4 dimanche. ____________

2. Translate the following sentences into French:

  (a) I fell when I was playing basket ball.

  (b) We went to a music festival, there were a lot of people there and we had a great 
    time! (Note: To have a great time is bien s’amuser. The word bien comes after the 
    verb in one-word tenses [e.g. je m’amuse bien, present tense] and after the first 
    verb in constructions using more than one verb [e.g. je vais bien m’amuser, immediate 
    future].)

  (c) He used to take his car to go to work, but last year, he started taking the bus. (Note: 
    to start doing something is commencer à + infinitive.)

  (d) I saw the robber! He was fat, he had grey hair and he was wearing a blue jacket.

  (e) My parents and I were very sad when you left.

  (a) ________________________________________________________________

  (b) ________________________________________________________________

  (c) ________________________________________________________________

  (d) ________________________________________________________________

  (e) ________________________________________________________________
Chapter 6: VERBS

The Immediate Past
This is not really a tense but a verb construction. It is very easy to use and will express that you have just done something. You use the verb venir in the present tense (be careful, venir is irregular), you add de and then your infinitive.

Example: You want to say I’ve just finished my exams.
The verb venir in the present tense with je is je viens; de comes next; then the verb to finish (the infinitive) which is finir.

Je viens de finir mes examens.

The interesting point with this structure is that you do not use a past tense. All you need to know is venir in the present tense and the infinitive of the verb you’re using. Of course, on the downside, it can only be used for very recent events.

EXERCICES

Translate the following sentences into French:
(a) We’ve just finished our exams. ___________________________________
(b) She’s just bought a new car. _____________________________________
(c) They’ve just left. _____________________________________________
(d) Have you just arrived? _________________________________________
(e) I’ve just seen a great film. _______________________________________

The Future
This is the tense you use to say you will do something. It is the tense you must use in formal letters. Unlike English, there is no word for will in French to show the verb is in the future. Instead you have to change the verb just like you do for other tenses.
The good news is that all verbs use the same set of endings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Add this ending:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For je or j'</td>
<td>ai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For tu</td>
<td>as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For il; elle; ce; ça; on</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For nous</td>
<td>ons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For vous</td>
<td>ez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For ils ; elles</td>
<td>ont</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Did you notice that those endings look very like the verb avoir in the present tense? That might help you to remember them.

To get the stem, you need to know whether your verb is regular or irregular:
Regular verb stem:
You will actually use the full infinitive, e.g. manger. The only part you remove is the e of RE verbs because otherwise you’d have too many vowels together.
And watch out for acheter which will have a grave accent on the first e, e.g. j’achèterai.

Irregular verb stem:
We’re back to learning a list. Here are a few common irregular stems:
- avoir → aur-
- être → ser-
- aller → ir-
- faire → fer-
- prendre → prendr-
- envoyer → enverr-
- pouvoir → pourr-
- devoir → devr-
- vouloir → voudr-
- voir → verr-

Note: All stems in the future end in r.

Now, you put the stem and the ending together to get the future tense of the verb you want to use.

Examples:
You want to say I will travel. The verb to travel is voyager. It is a regular verb so you will keep the full infinitive. The person you’re using is je so the ending you need is –ai.
I will travel → je + voyager- + -ai → je voyagerai

You now want to say we will go. To go is aller, which is irregular. Check the list of irregular stems and you find that for aller, you need the stem ir-. Next, you need to decide whether you’re using on or nous for we. The on ending is –a and the nous ending is –ons.
We will go → (i) on + ir- + -a → on ira (ii) nous + ir- + -ons → nous irons

Put the verbs in brackets into the Future:
(a) Ils (faire) la vaisselle plus tard. ____________________________
(b) On (pouvoir) faire du bateau. ____________________________
(c) Tu (aller) chez tes grands-parents cet été? ____________________________
(d) Je te (téléphoner) ce soir, ok ? ____________________________
(e) Elle (avoir) 16 ans en juillet. ____________________________