

Conversational
FRENCH
for Travelers

Just the Important Phrases

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Adapted into French by Nada Sneige Fuleihan



Conversational French for Travelers: Just the Important Phrases
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General French Pronunciation

Reproducing true French sounds from written French is difficult because there are many letter combinations to learn and many combinations that make the same or similar sounds.

Also, most letters at the end of a French word will usually be silent or only heard in a subtle way. But there is a reason for this. These "silent" letters in French will become important when we combine words to make phrases when we speak. This sounds complicated, but don't get dismayed!

Some general guidelines are given below. Since French has many unique sounds, it will be important to listen closely to spoken French. Watching short videos or movies will help. We will help a bit by providing phonetic pronunciation in the "Meeting and Greeting" section and occasionally for essential words or words that are exceptions to the sound rules below.

Nasal Sounds: The French letter combinations given in the last section make these four main nasal sounds:

eihn (ain, aim, ein, eim, in, im, un, um, yn, ym) train, vin
 ahn (an, am, en, em) important
 ohn (on, om) pardon
 wehn (oin, oim) coin

Silent Vowel with "Q + U" Combination: In French, the letter **u** is silent when it follows **q**. Below are some examples:
 quand = kahn, qui = kee, que = kuh, quoi = kwah

Silent Vowel "E" at the End of a Word: When the French letter **e** appears at the end of a word, it usually remains silent, and the preceding letter will be the final sound pronounced.

For example, in the word **voyage**, the "j" sound is the last sound that is pronounced. The **e** is seen but not heard.

Silent Consonants at the End of a Word:

The letters **c, d, g, p, r, t, s, x** and **z** are usually silent at the end of a word. Many of the other consonants may

Table of Contents

THE BASICS

The French Alphabet	4
The French Sound Combinations	5
General French Pronunciation	10
Meeting and Greeting	12
How to Be Polite in French	14
Basic Communication	18
Describing Where You Are From	22
French Street Addresses	27
Saying the Date in French	28
Money	29

TRANSPORTATION

At the Train Station	32
Buying a Ticket and Taking the Train	34
Asking for Assistance	36
Renting a Car—Take me?/Get in!	38
Coming and Going	40

CITY LIFE

Getting Ready	42
Meeting and Greeting at a Gathering	47
Shopping	52
Making Friends	56
Making a Telephone Call	66

AT THE HOTEL

Hotel Reservations	72
The Weather	76
Sightseeing	77
Finding One's Way and Directions	78

AT THE RESTAURANT

Speaking with the Waiter	82
Ordering at a Restaurant	86

The French Sound Combinations (cont'd)

Letters(s)	French Pronunciation	English Pronunciation Equivalent	
n	non	no	
o	pot	soap	oh sound
oi oin/oim	choix coin	swap when	wah sound wehn sound
on/om	pardon	wrong	ohn sound
ou	chou	zoo	oo sound
oui	oui	sweet	wee sound
p	pâte	poster	
ph	pharmacie	phone	ph = f sound
ps	psychologie	capsule	pronounce both the p sound and the s sound
qu	quand	kit	qu together make the simple k sound; the u is silent
r	restaurant	---	r is a fricative sound in back of the throat
s	sucre/ maison	sanity/ present	normal s sound; between 2 vowels the s sounds like z
ss	dessert	address	stressed s sound
sch	schéma	shovel	soft sh sound
sc	sculpture	scoff	
t	train	train	
th	thé	tea	t sound
u	supérieur	blew	ew sound with silent w

The French Sound Combinations

Here are the different letter combinations with an example word in French to represent how each written letter should sound when combined with other letters. An example of an English word with a sound that is as close as possible to the French pronunciation is given for each letter combination. Keep in mind that some sounds in French do not have an equivalent in English. If the sounds are identical in French and English, no explanation is given. Multiple examples are given when the pronunciation of a letter changes depending on its place in a word. French is one of the most beautiful languages spoken, and a little time spent learning how to pronounce the letter combinations will make learning the language much easier.

Letters(s)	French Pronunciation	English Pronunciation Equivalent	
a/â	ami/théâtre	artist	ah sound. The a with circumflex accent is pronounced the same way.
ai	chaise	flair	aih open sound
ay	payer	pay	ay
ain/aim	train/faim	vendor	eihn sound with the n or m letters nasal but quiet
an/am	France/ lampe	want	ahn open sound with n and m letters nasal but quiet
b	ballon	bell	
c+ consonant	crêpes	cream	
c+a,o,u	café	cat	hard c sound, like k
ç+a,o,u	ça va/ garçon	soap	s sound when the c has a cedilla

The French Sound Combinations (cont'd)

Letters(s)	French Pronunciation	English Pronunciation Equivalent	
c+i,e,y	cycle/cercle	similar	s sound when c is with these vowels without the cedilla
ch	charmant/enchanté	shop	soft sh sound
d	droite	dad	
e	demi/port(e)/femme*	sudden	long uh sound if e is in middle of the word. Silent (e) if at the end of a word; only the preceding letter sounds. *Exception: ah sound in <i>femme</i> .
é	école/café	able	ay sound
è	père	bear	long eh sound
ê	fête	bet	eh sound
ei	Seine	zen	eh sound
ein/eim	plein/Reims	splendid	eihn nasal sound with n quiet
eau	eau/bateau	boat	long oh sound
en/em	entrée/camembert	envelope/embrace	ahn open sound with the n or m quiet
er/ier/ez	manger/premier/nez	stay/player	yeh/eh
ett/ell double consonants	Toilettes/mademoiselle	bet/sell	eh sound
eu	fleur	purr	long uh (pointed mouth)

The French Sound Combinations (cont'd)

Letters(s)	French Pronunciation	English Pronunciation Equivalent	
euil	portefeuille	foil	uh+y
œ	sœur	purr	long uh sound
f	fabuleux	fan	
ga/go	gare/escargots	good	hard g sound
gi	gitanes	jeep	soft j sound
ge	argent	gender	soft j with short uh sound
gu+ vowel	guichet	guide	hard g sound u is silent
gn	oignon	onion	sounds like the "ni" in onion
h	hôtel	--	h is not pronounced in French
i	vite	meet	long ee sound
ie/ier	Asie/étudier	seed/yay	the e is silent after i, i + er = yeh sound
ien	bien	yet	yeihn (yen) nasal sound with n quiet
il/ill	famille/fouiller/ville*	eye/mayor	i+ll=y; eey,aiy,uiy with exceptions *i sound in <i>ville</i>
in/im	intéret/impossible	install/imposter	eihn sound n and m are nasal sounds. The consonants are quiet.
j	joli	jet	
l	lune	love	
m	mère	mother	

The French Alphabet

The French alphabet has 26 letters, most of which are Latin, except for a few letters that take their origin from other languages. The written form of each letter's name in French and the phonetic pronunciation are listed in separate columns.

Letter	French Name	Phonetic Pronunciation	Letter	French Name	Phonetic Pronunciation
a	a	ah	q	cu	kewh
b	bé	beh	r	èr	er
c	cé	seh	s	ès	es
d	dé	deh	t	té	teh
e	eu	uh	u	ew	ewh
f	ef	ef	v	vé	veh
g	gé	geh (soft)	w	double vé	doobluh veh
h	ash	ahsh	x	ics	eeks
i	i	ee	y	i grec	ee grek
j	ji	jee (soft)	z	zed	zed
k	ka	kah			
l	el	el			
m	èm	em			
n	èn	en			
o	o	oh			
p	pé	peh			

The French Sound Combinations (cont'd)

Letters(s)	French Pronunciation	English Pronunciation Equivalent	
ui	huit	sweet	short wee sound
un/um	chacun	pen	eihn nasal sound. The n is quiet.
v	vin	vine	
w	wagon	vent	v sound
x	fixe/ xylophone/ pri(x)	box/ xerox	normal x sound in middle of word; z sound at beginning; silent (x) at the end of a word.
y	yaourt/ bicyclette	yoyo/ candy	ya, ye, yo sound or ee at middle or end of word
yn/ym	synthèse/ sympa	synthetic	both yn/ym sound like eihn.
z	zéro	zero	soft z

The French "R" Sound: Open your mouth as if making the "h" sound. Place the tip of your tongue behind your bottom front teeth. Try to say "er" without moving the tip of your tongue by rolling the back of your tongue across your hard palate, where your uvula is. The sound is produced close to the uvula and sounds like gurgling or snoring.

Nasal Sounds: As you have seen in the letter combinations from the sound tables in this section, many letter combinations in French produce a nasal sound in which the letters **n** and **m** are barely hinted at in the pronunciation.

The following are the letter combinations that produce the nasal sounds grouped together: **ain, aim, an, am, ein, eim, en, em, in, im, oin, oim, on, om, un, um, yn, ym.**