



The French Subjunctive

French Lesson

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Video transcript

Hey there and welcome to Ablas! In this video, we're going to cover the French subjunctive, including when to use it, and how to conjugate it with an example conversation. Be sure to download the PDF of today's lesson from the link in the description!

What is the subjunctive?

So what actually is the French subjunctive?

The French subjunctive, le subjonctif, is a grammatical mood rather than a tense. It's used to express your feelings towards an action or event. Unlike the indicative mood, which is the one we use most often to talk about facts and objective truths, the subjunctive focuses on subjectivity, uncertainty and possibility.

In English, the subjunctive is rarely used for only a few expressions like, "if I were you", but in French, it's very common in both informal and formal settings.

When do we use it?

Let's explore the situations that require the subjunctive.

The first one is when you want something to happen.

- Je veux que tu finisses à temps. "I want you to finish on time." Notice that finisses is in the subjunctive present tense here.
- Il faut que tu te brosses les dents. "You have to brush your teeth."
- Il exige qu'elle se joigne à nous. "He insists that she join us."

We also need the subjunctive to express emotion and feelings.

- Je suis content qu'elle vienne. "I'm happy she's coming."
- Je crains qu'il soit trop tard. "I'm afraid that it's too late."
- Il est bizarre qu'ils soient fermés. "It's strange that they're closed."

We also use it when expressing doubt or talking about a possibility of something happening.

- Je ne suis pas sûr que ce soit correct. "I'm not sure this is right."
- Il se peut qu'il fasse trop chaud. "It could be that it's too hot."
- Je doute qu'il puisse le faire. "I doubt he can do it."

Some conjunctions require the subjunctive – here are some examples.

- bien que (although);
- pour que (so that);
- jusqu'à ce que (until);
- à condition que (provided that);
- avant que (before)

You might have noticed that most of the time the subjunctive follows the word "que". This is a good clue to look out for when figuring out if the subjunctive should be used. There are some other cases that require the subjunctive; for example:

- Le fait qu'elle ait gagné est incroyable. "The fact that she won is incredible." Even though this is a factual statement, we'd still need the subjunctive here.
- Que la lumière soit! "Let there be light!" This structure often appears in more formal language to express a wish or command.

And finally, there are some cases that don't require the subjunctive. For example, if we want to say, "Je pense que Paul est en retard", we'd use the normal indicative form here, because we're talking about someone's belief. "I think Paul is late." However, if we turn that into a negative sentence, it would require the subjunctive because the person is doubtful. Je ne pense pas que Paul soit en retard. There are also some conjunctions that don't require the subjunctive, even though they have "que" in them.

- savoir que (to know that);
- il est certain que (it's certain that);
- il est vrai que (it's true that)

How does it work?

Now we know when the subjunctive can occur, let's dive in and conjugate some verbs!

We'll start off with some regular verbs in the present tense. In this case, all you need to do is take the third-person plural of the verb in the present indicative tense. For example: ils finissent. Then, remove the -ent ending and add on the appropriate subjunctive ending.

Let's see this in practice with the verb "to sell": vendre. The subjunctive stem would be "vend", and so we can add the subjunctive endings onto that.

And let's also look at the verb "parler" (to talk).

	vendre	parler
je	vende	parle
tu	vendes	parles
il/elle/on	vende	parle
nous	vendions	parlions
vous	vendiez	parliez
ils/elles	vendent	parlent

And here are some irregular verbs: to go, to have and to be: aller, avoir, être.

	aller	avoir	être
je	aille	aie	sois
tu	ailles	aies	sois
il/elle/on	aille	aie	soit

nous	allions	ayons	soyons
vous	alliez	ayez	soyez
ils/elles	aillent	aient	soient

If you feel like going a step further, you can try conjugating the past subjunctive. Here we take the present subjunctive of the auxiliary verb, avoir or être, and add on the past participle of the main verb. Don't worry if that sounds confusing at first – let's look at some examples.

- Je suis heureuse que tu aies pu venir hier. "I'm glad that you could come yesterday." We're conjugating the auxiliary verb avoir, along with the past participle of the verb pouvoir.
- Il faut qu'il soit rentré avant minuit. "He must have come back before midnight."

Conversation

Now let's put the subjunctive into practice with an everyday conversation!

	English	French
	Léo and Alain arrive in front of the building where Denise, the estate agent, is waiting for them.	Léo et Alain arrivent devant l'immeuble où les attend Denise, l'agent immobilier.
Denise:	Hello! I'm Denise.	Bonjour ! Je suis Denise.
Léo:	Hello Denise. I'm Léo. I'm pleased that you found the time to see us today.	Bonjour Denise. Moi, c'est Léo. Je suis content que vous ayez trouvé le temps de nous recevoir aujourd'hui.
Alain:	And I'm Alain. We've been looking for months. It's essential that the flat is within our budget.	Et moi, Alain. On cherche depuis des mois. Il est essentiel que l'appartement soit dans notre budget.

	English	French
Denise:	I completely understand. Follow me, we need to go up to the third floor.	Je comprends parfaitement. Suivez-moi, il faut qu'on monte au troisième étage.
	They go up the stairs and Denise opens the front door with her keys.	Ils montent l'escalier et Denise ouvre la porte d'entrée avec ses clés.
Denise:	Here's the living room. There's lots of natural light. The previous owners redid the paint recently.	Voici le salon. Il y a beaucoup de lumière naturelle. Les anciens propriétaires ont refait la peinture récemment.
Léo:	It's spacious! Alain, do you think we can put our big sofa here?	C'est spacieux ! Alain, tu crois qu'on peut mettre notre grand canapé ici ?
Alain:	Of course! Denise, we'd need to see the kitchen as well.	Bien sûr ! Denise, il faudrait qu'on voie aussi la cuisine.
Denise:	Certainly. It's just there. Look at the new appliances.	Certainement. Elle est juste là. Regardez les nouveaux électroménagers.
	They enter the modern kitchen. Alain examines the fridge while Léo looks out of the window.	Ils entrent dans la cuisine moderne. Alain examine le réfrigérateur pendant que Léo regarde par la fenêtre.
Alain:	It's perfect! Shame the old flat didn't have a kitchen like this.	Elle est parfaite ! Dommage que l'ancien appart n'ait pas eu une cuisine comme ça.
Léo:	You're right. Denise, do you think the landlord will accept our offer if we make it today?	Tu as raison. Denise, vous pensez que le propriétaire acceptera notre offre si on la fait aujourd'hui ?

	English	French
Denise:	That's quite possible. It's better that you make a decision quickly. Other visitors are coming tomorrow.	C'est tout à fait possible. Il vaut mieux que vous preniez une décision rapidement. D'autres visiteurs viennent demain.
Alain:	I didn't think we would find one so quickly! But it's important that we discuss it together first.	Je ne pensais pas qu'on trouverait si vite ! Mais il est important qu'on discute ensemble d'abord.
	Denise leads them to the main bedroom. The view over the park impresses the two friends.	Denise les conduit vers la chambre principale. La vue sur le parc impressionne les deux amis.
Denise:	This view is magnificent, isn't it? It's probably the main selling point of the flat.	Cette vue est magnifique, non ? C'est probablement l'atout principal de l'appartement.
Léo:	Absolutely! Alain, I'm surprised that we're so lucky. This place is exactly what we were looking for.	Absolument ! Alain, je suis surpris qu'on soit si chanceux. Cet endroit est exactement ce qu'on cherchait.
Alain:	Denise, we need to know: are there any hidden fees?	Denise, il faut qu'on sache : il y a des frais cachés ?
Denise:	No hidden fees. I doubt you would find better at this price in the neighbourhood.	Aucun frais caché. Je doute que vous trouviez mieux à ce prix dans le quartier.
Léo:	Perfect! It's time we made this decision. Alain, what do you think?	Parfait ! Il est temps qu'on prenne cette décision. Alain, qu'est-ce que tu en penses ?
Alain:	I think we should make an offer. Although it is a big commitment, I'm confident.	Je pense qu'on devrait faire une offre. Bien que ce soit un gros engagement, j'ai confiance.

It's quiz time!

So, did you spot the subjunctive mood in that conversation? Feel free to leave us a comment with any questions. But we're not done yet – it's quiz time!

Which phrase typically triggers the subjunctive?

- A. Je sais que
- B. Je doute que
- C. Il est certain que

The correct answer is... Je doute que.

Which of these does NOT trigger the subjunctive?

- A. Je pense que
- B. Il est possible que
- C. Je ne crois pas que

The correct answer is... Je pense que.

How do you conjugate the verb 'to do' in the first-person subjunctive present tense?

- A. Je faie
- B. Je fais
- C. Je fasse

The correct answer is... Je fasse.

Your task

Well done for getting this far!

Now your task is to extend the conversation from earlier where the two friends move into their new apartment. Try to throw in some examples of the subjunctive where possible.

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