

French A1

— What to Study

Level: **A1 (Breakthrough)** • Language: **French** • Audience: **Learners**

A1 is the point where French stops being a stream of sounds that don't match their spelling and becomes a language you can survive in. You are not aiming for elegant sentences. You are aiming to handle predictable, concrete situations — introducing yourself, ordering in a café, asking where something is — with a patient speaker who is willing to slow down.

The Common European Framework describes A1 as being able to understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at satisfying concrete needs; to introduce yourself and others; to ask and answer questions about personal details such as where you live, people you know and things you have; and to interact simply provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Everything below serves that description. If a grammar point does not help you do one of those things, it is not an A1 problem yet.

Grammar to master

Nouns, gender and articles. Every French noun is masculine or feminine, and the article is often the only place you can hear it. Learn every noun with its article — *le livre, la table, l'école* (feminine) — rather than learning the word alone.

- Definite and indefinite articles: *le / la / l' / les, un / une / des*
- The partitive for amounts of food and drink: *du pain, de la confiture, de l'eau, des pâtes*
- Contractions with *à* and *de*: *au cinéma, aux États-Unis, du marché, des amis*
- Plurals, which are mostly silent in speech: *le livre → les livres*

The present tense. At A1 the present does most of the work.

- Regular *-er* verbs, the largest group: *je parle, tu parles, il parle, nous parlons, vous parlez, ils parlent*
- The irregulars you meet in every conversation: *être, avoir, aller, faire, venir, prendre, pouvoir, vouloir*
- The near future with *aller* plus the infinitive: *Je vais manger*
- *Il y a* for "there is" and "there are"

Pronouns and address.

- Subject pronouns, including *on*, which in everyday speech usually means "we": *On va au cinéma ?*
- *tu* for friends, family and other students; *vous* for strangers, staff and more than one person

- Possessives: *mon / ma / mes, ton / ta / tes, son / sa / ses, notre, votre, leur*
- Demonstratives: *ce, cet, cette, ces*

Sentence building.

- Negation around the verb with *ne ... pas*: *Je ne parle pas allemand*. In casual speech the *ne* is often dropped, but write it
- Questions by intonation (*Tu viens ?*), with *est-ce que*, and with question words: *qui, que / quoi, où, quand, comment, combien, pourquoi*
- Adjective agreement, and position: most adjectives follow the noun, but a small group of common ones come before it — *un petit café, une grande maison, un bon restaurant*
- Countries and cities: *à Paris, en France, au Portugal, aux États-Unis*
- *C'est* versus *il / elle est*: *C'est mon ami. Il est gentil*.

Vocabulary areas

Aim for roughly 500 to 800 words you can actually retrieve, not recognise — each noun with its article. Depth in these areas beats breadth across topics you will not use.

- Greetings, farewells and courtesy formulas: *bonjour, bonsoir, salut, merci, s'il vous plaît, excusez-moi*
- Personal information: name, age, origin, nationality, languages, phone number, email
- Family and relationships
- Professions and workplaces
- Physical description and basic personality adjectives
- The home: rooms, furniture, everyday objects
- Food and drink, meals, ordering in a café or bakery
- Numbers 0 to 100, prices, telling the time, days, months, dates
- Colours and clothing
- The city: shops, public buildings, directions, public transport
- Daily routine and free-time activities
- Weather and seasons

What you should be able to do

Treat this as the real exit test for the level. Grammar you cannot deploy in these situations is not yet learned.

- Introduce yourself and give your personal details, and ask someone else for theirs

- Spell your name aloud using the French alphabet and understand a spelled name, including accents
- Describe your family and where you live
- Say what you do for work or study
- Order food and drink and ask what something costs
- Ask for and follow simple directions
- Talk about your daily routine and what you like and dislike: *J'aime le cinéma, Je n'aime pas le sport*
- Fill in a form with your personal data
- Write a short message, postcard or simple personal introduction
- Understand slow, clearly articulated speech on these familiar topics

Common difficulties

Spelling and sound drift apart. Final consonants are usually silent, *-ent* at the end of a verb is silent, and liaison links words together: *les amis* sounds like "lay-zamee". Learn new words by listening, not only by reading.

Gender you cannot hear. In the plural and before a vowel (*les, l'*), the article no longer tells you the gender. Always learn the singular form with *le* or *la*.

Numbers from 70 to 99. *Soixante-dix* ($60 + 10$), *quatre-vingts* (4×20) and *quatre-vingt-dix* ($4 \times 20 + 10$). Belgium and Switzerland use *septante* and *nonante* instead, and you should recognise both.

Tu or vous. Using *tu* with a stranger can sound rude; using *vous* with a friend sounds cold. When in doubt, start with *vous* and switch when the other person does.

False friends. *Une librairie* is a bookshop, not a library. *Actuellement* means currently, not actually. *Attendre* means to wait, not to attend. *Sensible* means sensitive.

How to know you are ready for A2

You are ready when you can hold a slow, simple conversation about yourself and your immediate surroundings without rehearsing it first, and when the present tense of the common irregular verbs comes out without hesitation. If you still cannot follow a slowly spoken sentence because the words blur together, spend more time listening at A1 before moving on.

Course hour estimates for each level vary widely; treat any figure you see as a rough scale, not a target.

Next step

Move on to the French A2 guide, which brings in the past tenses so you can talk about what already happened.

Written by GongbuLeng. Aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) A1 descriptors. For the official French examination at this level, the DELF A1, see France Éducation internationale's DELF page.