

French B1

— What to Study

Level: **B1 (Threshold)** • Language: **French** • Audience: **Learners**

B1 is the level at which French becomes a tool rather than a subject. You can travel on your own, deal with most everyday problems, follow a conversation between native speakers when they speak clearly, and explain what you think and why. It is also the level at which the subjunctive stops being a curiosity and becomes something you use every day.

The Common European Framework describes B1 as being able to understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school and leisure; to deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling; to produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest; and to describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions, and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

Grammar to master

Narrating in the past.

- *Passé composé* and *imparfait* used together confidently in a story
- The *plus-que-parfait* for an earlier past: *Quand je suis arrivé, le film avait déjà commencé*
- Recognising the *passé simple* in written stories and books, without needing to produce it

The conditional. The key to politeness and to hypotheses.

- Forms: the future stem plus the *imparfait* endings — *je voudrais, je pourrais, j'aimerais, ce serait*
- Polite requests and advice: *Pourriez-vous m'aider ?, Tu devrais te reposer*
- Hypotheses: *si* plus the *imparfait*, then the conditional — *Si j'avais le temps, je voyagerais*
- Real conditions with *si* plus the present, then the future — *Si tu viens, on ira au cinéma*

The present subjunctive. Used after expressions of necessity, will, emotion and doubt, and after certain conjunctions.

- After *il faut que, je veux que, je voudrais que, je suis content que, j'ai peur que*
- After *pour que, bien que, avant que, à condition que*
- The irregular forms you will use most: *que je sois, que j'aie, que j'aie, que je fasse, que je puisse, que je sache*

Pronouns in depth.

- *y* and *en* in all their common uses

- Two object pronouns together in the right order: *Je te le donne, Il le lui a dit*
- Relative pronouns *dont* and *ce qui / ce que*: *le livre dont je parle, Ce qui me plaît, c'est...*

More structures.

- The passive with *être*: *La décision a été prise hier*, and *on* as the everyday alternative: *On a pris la décision hier*
- Reported speech in the present: *Il dit qu'il viendra, Elle demande si tu es libre*
- The *gérondif* for simultaneous actions and manner: *en marchant, en travaillant*
- Connectors: *pourtant, cependant, donc, alors que, puisque, afin de / afin que*

Vocabulary areas

Aim for roughly 2,500 active words and a much larger passive vocabulary.

- Work: applications, interviews, the workplace, colleagues and conflicts
- Education and training, including the French school and university system
- Media: news, the internet, social networks
- Health and lifestyle, sport and nutrition
- Relationships, feelings and personal problems
- Travel problems: complaints, lost property, changing plans
- The environment, the city and the countryside
- Opinions, agreement and disagreement

What you should be able to do

- Handle most situations on a trip, including problems and complaints
- Describe experiences, events, hopes and plans in connected speech
- Give your opinion on a familiar topic and support it with reasons and examples
- Follow the main points of a discussion or talk in clear standard French
- Understand the main points of news items and articles on familiar subjects
- Write a personal letter or a simple formal email: a complaint, a request, an application
- Tell the story of a film or book and say what you thought of it
- Take part in a conversation on familiar topics without preparation

Common difficulties

When the subjunctive is required. Learn the triggers as fixed expressions — *il faut que, bien que, pour que* — and note the trap: *penser que* and *croire que* take the indicative when affirmative (*Je pense qu'il vient*), and often the subjunctive when negative (*Je ne pense pas qu'il vienne*).

Future or conditional? *J'irai* and *j'irais* sound almost identical in many accents. Context, and the *si* clause, tell you which one is meant.

Dont. It replaces *de plus* a noun and has no single English equivalent: *le film dont tout le monde parle*. Collect examples rather than trying to translate it.

Real spoken French. Outside the classroom, *ne* disappears, *il y a* becomes "y'a", and words are cut short. You will also meet slang and *verlan*. Understanding it is a B1 goal; imitating it can wait.

How to know you are ready for B2

You are ready when you can explain your opinion on a familiar topic for a few minutes without searching for basic structures, when you use the conditional and the common subjunctive triggers without thinking, and when you can read a newspaper article on a familiar topic and follow its main argument. If you still avoid the subjunctive in speech, spend more time at B1.

Next step

Move on to the French B2 guide, which takes you into abstract topics, argued writing and the more formal registers of the language.

Written by GongbuLeng. Aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) B1 descriptors. For the official French examination at this level, the DELF B1, see France Éducation internationale's DELF page.