The 7 Most Common French Tenses Made Easy (Recipes)

The secret!

The secret is to simply and only* learn the following:

1. **The present tense** (which is actually called “indicatif présent”/”indicative present” in your dictionary, but is often referred to as “present” by default). There are ways to learn how to conjugate verbs in the present rather easily.

2. **The past participles** (used to make the past tense, such as “fini”, “lu”, “connu”, pris”, etc.

3. **The irregular forms of future tense** (“futur simple”)

*Of course, French grammar wouldn’t be French grammar without its exceptions, for example “être” in the imparfait (imperfect) tense. Nothing is perfect indeed!

For the following recipes, you will also need to use:

- the **infinitive** (“infinitif”).
  Refresher: in French, the infinitives are easily identifiable as they end in –ER (aller, parler...), -IR (finir, partir,...) or –RE (prendre, lire,...)

- the **stem/root** (“radical”) is the part of the verb that doesn’t change (for regular verbs) and that allows you to recognize the verb in spite of the alterations you make to it when conjugating it:
  
  Ex.1: *I walk, he walks, we have been walking* → *these are different forms of the verb “to walk”*

  Ex.2: *je regarde, tu regardes, nous regardons* → « regarder » is a verb with one unique stem (regard-) in the present tense.

  *je prends, il prend, nous prenons, ils prennent* → « prendre » has 3 different stems in the present tense: prend-, pren-, prenn-

  - the **ending** (“terminaison”) is the part that you attach to the stem of the verb. With each person and each tense goes a specific ending, which you need to learn.
Recipe #1 : Passé composé
(perfect, eg. I did, I have done)

You’ll need:

“être”* or “avoir” in the present tense + the past participle of your verb
(*Generally use « avoir ». For a reminder of which verbs take “être”, see here)

- regarder → j’ai regardé
- finir → j’ai fini
- aller → je suis allé

Exercise 1: Your turn! Conjugate the following in passé composé: (answers at the end)

1. manger : tu _____________
2. venir : il _______________
3. lire : nous _____________

Recipe #2 : Imparfait
(imperfect, eg. I was doing / I used to do)

You’ll need:

The stem of the “nous” form in present tense (= remove the “ons” ending) + characteristic endings of the imperfect tense: -ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient

- finir → nous finissons (present tense) → je finissais, tu finissais, il finissait, etc. (imperfect)
- apprendre → nous apprenons (present tense) → j’apprenais, tu apprenais, il apprenait, etc (imperfect)

Exercise 2: Your turn! Conjugate the following in imparfait:

1. manger : tu _____________
2. venir : il _______________
3. lire : nous _____________

Recipe #3 : Passé récent
(recent past, eg. I just did, I’ve just done)

You’ll need:

“venir” in the present tense + de + infinitive

- finir → je viens de finir
- partir → vous venez de partir

Exercise 3: Your turn! Conjugate the following in passé récent:

1. manger : tu _____________
2. venir : il _______________
3. lire : nous _____________
Recipe #4: Futur proche
(near future, eg. I’m going to do)

You’ll need:
“aller” in the present tense + infinitive

- faire → je vais faire
- aller → vous allez aller
- commencer → ils vont commencer

Exercise 4:
Your turn! Conjugate the following in futur proche:
1. manger : tu ____________
2. venir : il ____________
3. lire : nous ____________

Recipe #5: Futur simple
(future simple, eg. I will do)

You’ll need:
- For regular verbs: the infinitive (drop the final “e” for infinitives ending in –RE)
- For irregular verbs: the irregular stem (list here)
+ characteristic endings of the future tense (= the same forms as verb “avoir” in the present tense !) : -ai, -as, -a, -ons, -ez, -ont

(regular verbs)
- regarder → je regarderai
- finir → tu finiras
- comprendre → il comprendra
(irregular verbs)
- aller → j’irai
- être → tu seras

Exercise 5:
Your turn! Conjugate the following in futur simple:
1. manger : tu ____________
2. venir : il ____________
3. lire : nous ____________

Recipe #6: Conditionnel présent
(conditional present, eg. I would do)

You’ll need:
The stem of the future tense (infinitive or irregular form) + imperfect endings

- regarder → je regarderais
- être → nous serions

Exercise 6:
Your turn! Conjugate the following in conditionnel présent:
1. manger : tu ____________
2. venir : il ____________
3. lire : nous ____________
Recipe #7: Subjonctif présent
(subjunctive present – rare in English, that he do)

You’ll need:

- For the “je”, “tu”, “il/elle/on”, “ils/elles” forms:
  the stem of the “ils” form in present tense (remove the “-ent” ending)
  + characteristic endings of the subjontive tense (the same as –ER verbs in indicative
    present tense): -e (je), -es (tu), -e (il), -ent (ils)
  &

- For the “nous” and “vous” forms:
  the same form as the imparfait!

*There are a few irregular verbs in subjunctive tense, check them [here](#)

- finir --> ils finissent (indicative present) → que je finisse, que nous finissions (subjunctive
  present)
- boire → ils boivent (indicative present) → que je boive, que nous buvions (subjunctive
  present)

Exercise 7:
Your turn! Conjugate the following in subjonctif présent:
1. manger : tu __________________
2. venir : il __________________
3. lire : nous__________________
Answers

Exercise 1: passé composé
Tu as mangé, il est venu (« venir » takes « être » in passé composé), nous avons lu

Exercise 2: imparfait
manger → nous mangeons (present tense) → tu mangeais (imperfect)
venir → nous venons (present tense) → il venait (imperfect)
lire → nous lisons (present tense) → nous lisions (imperfect)

Exercise 3: passé récent
manger → tu viens de manger
venir → il vient de venir
lire → nous venons de lire

Exercise 4: Futur proche
manger → tu vas manger
venir → il va venir
lire → nous allons lire

Exercise 5: futur simple
manger → tu mangeras
venir (irregular) → il viendra
lire → nous lirons

Exercise 6: conditionnel présent
manger → tu mangerais
venir → il viendrait
lire → nous lirions

Exercise 7: subjonctif présent
manger → ils mangent (indicative present) → que tu manges (subjunctive present)
venir → ils viennent (indicative present) → qu’il vienne, que nous buvions (subjunctive present)
lire → nous lisons (imperfect) → que nous lissions (subjunctive present)