

How French is More Precise than English



Important

French often forces you to **encode information that English leaves implicit.**

English is happy to let context do a lot of the work; French is much less tolerant of ambiguity and likes to "tie the threads together" grammatically.

Here are some of the biggest differences.



1. French often requires an adverbial pronoun where English omits it

That's where Y and EN come in

- J'**en** ai trois → I have three (*of them*)
- Je n'**en** ai pas → I don't have *any* (*of it/them*)
- J'**en** ai acheté un → I bought one (*of them*)
- J'**y** vais → I am going (*there*)



2. Relative pronouns are always expressed

- Le livre **qui** s'appelle *Alice au Pays des Merveilles* est génial → the book (**which is**) called *Alice in Wonderland* is great.
- Regarde, c'est la voiture **que** je veux acheter → Look, it's the car (**that**) I want to buy.
- C'est le restaurant **dont** on parlait → That's the restaurant we were talking **about** (that's the restaurant **about which** we were talking)



3. French often use both types of pronouns to refer back to earlier nouns/ideas

- J'y pense → I am thinking **about it**
- Il **en** a besoin → He needs **it** (he has a need **of it**)
- C'est **ce dont** on parlait l'autre jour → That's **what** we were talking **about** the other day (*that's **the thing about which** we were talking the other day*)



4. Relative pronouns are often more informative and come earlier in the sentence

- C'est la visite à **laquelle** je pense → **It's the visit I am thinking about** (*it's the visit **about which** I am thinking*)
- À **qui** tu parles ? → **Who** are you talking **to?** (***to whom** are you talking?*)
- C'est l'ami **avec qui** je jouais au golf → **It's the friend I used to play golf with** (*it's the friend **with whom** I used to play golf*).



5. French specifies location more precisely

- We're eating **out** → On mange au restaurant/on mange dehors.
- We're going **out out** → On mange au restaurant et on va en boîte après.
- The keys are **on the side** (UK English) → Les clés sont sur la surface de travail/sur le buffet/sur le meuble, etc.



6. Prepositions are more varied

The little words **to** and **in** do an enormous amount of grammatical heavy lifting in English. French tends to divide their jobs among several more specific words.

In English, **to** can indicate many relationships:

- direction I'm going to Paris
- recipient Give this to me
- purpose I went to the bakery to buy bread
- comparison I prefer coffee to tea
- infinitive I want to leave.



French doesn't. It distinguishes them:

- direction Je vais **à** Paris
- recipient Donne-le **moi** / donne-le **à** Nathalie
- purpose* Je vais à la boulangerie **pour** acheter du pain.
- comparison Je préfère le thé **au** café
- infinitive marker Je veux partir.

** Note the purpose is always expressed in French !*



The same thing happens with **in**. English often asks only, "Is there some sort of relationship?" and uses **in** or **to**. French asks "What kind of relationship is it exactly?" and chooses the appropriate word. Compare:

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| • in France | en France |
| • in Paris | à Paris |
| • in the car | dans la voiture |
| • in hospital | à l'hôpital |
| • in two weeks | dans deux semaines |
| • in the picture | sur la photo |
| • in the morning | le matin |
| • in winter | en hiver |



7. The NE QUE restriction is more precise



Je **ne** vais à la gym **qu'**une fois par semaine → I **only** go to the gym once a week (I go to the gym **but only once a week**).

English leaves the "only" at the beginning and lets you infer where the restriction is.

In French, the restriction depends on the position of the QUE in the sentence:

Je **ne** vais **qu'**à la gym une fois par semaine → I **only** go to the gym once a week (I go to the gym once a week **and nowhere else**).



8. French has several words for THERE

English has one word where French has at least three: **y** (place you have already mentioned), **là** (place you are pointing at) and **en** (from there):

- J'**en** reviens → I am coming back **from there**
- Mets-le **là** → Put it **there**
- Ils **y** sont → They're **there**



9. Possession is expressed earlier in the sentence

- Je **me** suis cassé le bras → I broke **my** arm (*I broke **myself** the arm*).
- Il **se** lave les mains → He's washing **his** hands (*he's washing **himself** the hands*).
- Elle **s'**est brossé les dents → she brushed **her** teeth (*she brushed **herself** the teeth*).



10. French doesn't like using the unspecified IT for people or objects

- C'est génial → it is great (this whole thing/situation is great)
- Ça me paraît difficile → it seems difficult to me (this whole thing/situation seems difficult to me)
- Il est génial → he/it is great (specific masculine it or he)
- Elles sont ici → they are here (specific feminine they)



11. Time expressions are often more exact

- J'habite ici **depuis** trois ans → I have been living here for three years (it is still continuing, hence **present tense + Depuis**).
- J'ai habité ici **pendant** trois ans → I lived here for three years (it is a completed or limited period. You no longer live here, hence **passé composé + Pendant**).
- Elle est partie au Canada **pour** deux ans → she left for Canada for 2 years (she has just left, so **Pour** refers to a future duration).



12. A few exceptions

- This / that → **ça**
- Inside out, upside down, back to front → **à l'envers**
- His, her, its → **son / sa / ses**, which tells you the gender and number of the noun possessed, **not the owner.**

