French Grammar: Expressing Duration of Time

Study:

When talking about activities and events in French, it’s helpful to know how to express how long ago or for how long those activities and events took, are taking, or will take place.

There are different considerations to keep in mind when you want to talk about the duration of an activity or an event:

1. To talk about actions that began in the past and are still going on, use the present tense with one of the following formulas:

**a. DEPUIS + time frame:**

Tu apprends le français depuis deux ans.

You have been learning French for two years.

**b. IL Y A + time frame + QUE (QU’):**

Il y a deux ans que tu apprends le français.

You have been learning French for two years.

**c. VOILÀ + time frame + QUE (QU’):**

Voilà deux ans que tu apprends le français.

You have been learning French for two years.

**d. ÇA FAIT + time frame + QUE (QU’):**

Ça fait deux ans que tu apprends le français.

You have been learning French for two years.

As you can see, all four of the formulas above are different ways of saying the same thing, although ÇA FAIT … QUE (QU’) is used most often in spoken (not written) French. It’s important to note that French uses Present Tense to express the idea, while English uses a Past Tense form to express the same thing!

To ask how long an activity or event has been going on, use one of the following formulas:

**a. DEPUIS + combien de temps OR DEPUIS + quand :**

Depuis combien de temps apprends-tu le français?

For how long have you been learning French?

Depuis quand apprends-tu le français?

For how long have you been learning French?

**b. IL Y A + combien de temps + que (qu’) :**

Il y a combien de temps que tu apprends le français ?

For how long have you been learning French?

**c. ÇA FAIT + combien de temps + que (qu’) :**

Ça fait combien de temps que tu apprends le français ?

For how long have you been learning French?

2. For actions that had already been going on in the past, use one of the following formulas from above with the Imperfect Tense:

**a. DEPUIS + time frame :**

Tu apprenais le français depuis deux ans.

You had been learning French for two years.

**b. IL Y AVAIT + time frame + QUE (QU’) :**

Il y avait deux ans que tu apprenais le français.

You had been learning French for two years.

**c. VOILÀ + time frame + QUE (QU’) :**

Voilà deux ans que tu apprenais le français.

You had been learning French for two years.

**d. ÇA FAISAIT + time frame + QUE (QU’) :**

Ça faisait deux ans que tu apprenais le français.

You had been learning French for two years.

To ask how long an activity or event had been going on, use one of the following formulas:

**a. DEPUIS + combien de temps OR DEPUIS + quand :**

Depuis combien de temps apprenais-tu le français?

For how long had you been learning French?

Depuis quand apprenais-tu le français?

For how long had you been learning French?

**b. IL Y AVAIT + combien de temps + que (qu’) :**

Il y avait combien de temps que tu apprenais le français?

For how long had you been learning French?

**c. ÇA FAISAIT + combien de temps + que (qu’) :**

Ça faisait combien de temps que tu apprenais le français?

For how long had you been learning French?

3. DEPUIS can also be used to mean “since”. Use Present Tense in this construction if the action is (or was) still ongoing:

**DEPUIS + specific condition/occasion/date :**

Depuis mon enfance je veux visiter Paris.

Since my childhood, I have wanted to visit Paris.

**DEPUIS QUE (QU’) + a clause :**

Depuis que je suis jeune, je veux visiter Paris.

Since I was young, I have wanted to visit Paris.

4. To talk about a completed past action, use one of the following formulas:

**Passé Composé (Past Tense) + PENDANT + time frame :**

Elle a étudié le français pendant quatre ans.

She studied French for four years. (She has stopped studying French.)

Passé Simple (Historic Past Tense) + PENDANT + time frame :

George W. Bush fut Président des ÉE-UU pendant huit ans.

George W. Bush was President of the US for 8 years. (He completed his term in office.)

With some verbs that are associated closely with a time period, the completed time period can follow directly after the verb without pendant:

Ils ont vécu trois ans en France.

They lived (for) three years in France.

J’ai travaillé dix ans à New York.

I worked (for) ten years in New York City.

5. Use POUR to talk about the duration of an intended future action or event:

Je voudrais voyager en Corse pour un mois.

I would like to travel to Corsica for one month.

You can use PENDANT to emphasize the duration of an intended future action or event:

Je serai en Corse pendant un mois.

I will be in Corsica for one month.

Adapt:

Voilà une demi-heure que nous vous attendons!

We have been waiting for you all for a half-hour!

Depuis quand est-ce que tu habites ici?

For how long have you been living here?

J’habite ici depuis cinq ans.

I have been living here for five years.

Il y a combien de temps qu’il est malade?

For how long has he been sick?

Il y a deux jours qu’il est malade.

He has been sick for two days.

Ça fait combien de temps qu’elles travaillent au restaurant?

For how long have they (feminine) been working at the restaurant?

Ça fait sept mois qu’elles travaillent au restaurant.

They (feminine) have been working at the restaurant for seven months.

Pendant combien de temps êtes-vous restés chez vous?

For how long did you all stay home?

Nous sommes restés chez nous pendant une heure.

We stayed home for one hour.

Pour combien de temps est-ce qu’elle va en Italie?

For how long is she going to Italy?

Elle sera en Italie pendant trois semaines.

She will be in Italy for three weeks.