**PASSE COMPOSE VS. IMPARFAIT**

One of the most striking differences between French and English is in verb tenses. Learning how to use the various past tenses can be very tricky, because English has several tenses which either do not exist in or do not translate literally into French - and vice versa.  
  
During the first year of French study, every student becomes aware of the troublesome relationship between the two main past tenses. The [imperfect](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/imperfect.htm) [je mangeais] translates to the English imperfect [I was eating] while the [passé composé](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/passecompose.htm) [j'ai mangé] literally translates to the English present perfect [I have eaten] but can also be translated as the English simple past [I ate] or the emphatic past [I did eat].  
  
It is extremely important to understand the distinctions between the passé composé and imperfect in order to use them correctly and thus express past events accurately. Before you can compare them, however, be sure that you understand each tense individually, as this will make it a lot easier to figure out how they work together.

Generally speaking, the imperfect **describes past situations**, while the passé composé **narrates specific events**. In addition, the imperfect can set the stage for an event expressed with the passé composé. Compare the uses of these two tenses:  
  
**1. Incomplete vs Complete**  
  
The imperfect describes an ongoing action with no specified completion:  
  
   *J'allais en France.* - I was going to France.  
 *Je visitais des monuments et prenais des photos.* - I was visiting monuments and taking pictures  
  
The passé composé expresses one or more events or actions that began and ended in the past:  
  
   *Je suis allé en France.* - I went to France.  
 *J'ai visité des monuments et pris des photos.* - I visited some monuments and took some pictures.  
  
  
**2. Habitual vs Occasional**  
  
The imperfect is used for habitual or repeated actions, something that happened an uncounted number of times:  
  
   *Je voyageais en France* ***tous les ans****.* - I traveled (used to travel) to France every year.

*Je visitais* ***souvent*** *le Louvre.* - I often visited the Louvre.  
  
The passé composé talks about a single event, or an event that happened a specific number of times:  
  
   *J'ai voyagé en France* ***l'année dernière****.* - I traveled in France last year.  
 *J'ai visité le Louvre* ***trois fois****.* - I've visited the Louvre three times.

**3. Ongoing vs New**  
  
The imperfect describes a general physical or mental state of being:  
  
   *J'avais peur des chiens.* - I was afraid of dogs.  
 *J'aimais les épinards.* - I used to like spinach.  
  
The passé composé indicates a change in physical or mental state at a precise moment or for an isolated cause:  
  
   *J'ai eu peur quand le chien a aboyé.* - I was scared when the dog barked.  
 *Pour la première fois, j'ai aimé les épinards.* - For the first time, I liked spinach.  
  
  
**4. Background + Interruption**  
  
The imperfect and passé composé sometimes work together - the imperfect provides a description/background info, to set the scene of how things were or what was happening (past tense of "be" + verb with -ing usually indicates this) when something (expressed with the passé composé) interrupted.  
  
   *J'étais à la banque quand Chirac est arrivé.* - I was at the bank when Chirac arrived.  
 *Je vivais en Espagne quand je l'ai trouvé.* - I was living in Spain when I found it.  
  
  
[**Imperfect**](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/imperfect.htm)  
  
*Quand j'avais 15 ans, je voulais être psychiatre. Je m'intéressais à la psychologie parce que je connaissais beaucoup de gens très bizarres. Le week-end, j'allais à la bibliothèque et j'étudiais pendant toute la journée.*  
  
When I was 15, I wanted to be a psychiatrist. I was interested in psychology because I knew a lot of really weird people. On the weekends, I used to go to the library and study all day.  
  
  
[**Passé composé**](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/passecompose.htm)  
  
*Un jour, je suis tombé malade et j'ai découvert les miracles de la médecine. J'ai fait la connaissance d'un médecin et j'ai commencé à étudier avec lui. Quand la faculté de médecine m'a accepté, je n'ai plus pensé à la psychologie.*  
  
One day, I got sick and discovered the wonders of medicine. I met a doctor and started studying with him. After the medical school accepted me, I didn't think about psychology any more.

**Indicators**  
The following key words and phrases tend to be used with either the imperfect or the passé composé, so when you see any of them, you know which tense you need:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Imperfect*** | | ***Passé composé*** | |
| *chaque semaine, mois, année* | every week, month, year | *une semaine, un mois, un an* | one week, month, year |
| *le week-end* | on the weekends | *un week-end* | one weekend |
| *le lundi, le mardi...* | on Mondays, on Tuesdays... | *lundi, mardi...* | on Monday, on Tuesday |
| *tous les jours* | every day | *un jour* | one day |
| *le soir* | in the evenings | *un soir* | one evening |
| *toujours* | always | *soudainement* | suddenly |
| *normalement* | usually | *tout à coup, tout d'un coup* | all of a sudden |
| *d'habitude* | usually | *une fois, deux fois...* | once, twice... |
| *en général, généralement* | in general, generally | *enfin* | finally |
| *souvent* | often | *finalement* | in the end |
| *parfois, quelquefois* | sometimes | *plusieurs fois* | several times |
| *de temps en temps* | from time to time |  |  |
| *rarement* | rarely |  |  |
| *autrefois* | formerly |  |  |

**Usually imperfect**  
  
Some French verbs are nearly always used in the imperfect rather than the passé composé:

* aimer - to like, love
* croire - to believe
* espérer - to hope
* être - to be
* penser - to think
* sembler - to seem
* sentir - to feel
* vouloir - to want

These verbs describe a state of mind or state of being. They are most often in the imperfect because verbs like "wanting" and "being" do not usually have a clear indicator of start and finish - either they last for an unspecified amount of time or they are interrupted by some other action.  
  
   *J'aimais danser quand j'étais jeune.*  
   I liked to dance when I was young.  
  
   *Je croyais en Dieu.*  
   I believed in God.

*J'espérais gagner.*  
   I hoped (was hoping) to win.  
  
   *J'étais heureux l'année passée.*  
   I was happy last year.  
  
   *Je pensais à mon frère.*  
   I was thinking about my brother.  
  
   *Il semblait trop parfait.*  
   It seemed too perfect.  
  
   *Je me sentais malade pendant toute la journée.*  
   I felt sick all day.  
  
   *Je voulais rentrer après le film.*  
   I wanted to go home after the movie.  
  
  
However, these verbs are used in the passé composé when there is a clear indication of the beginning or end of the action of the verb, or when it is obvious that this was a simple action that only occurred once.  
  
   *Je n'ai pas aimé le film.*  
   I didn't like the movie.  
  
   *Je ne t'ai pas cru quand tu as dit...*  
   I didn't believe you when you said...  
  
   *Hier, j'ai espéré que tu viendrais ; aujourd'hui, ça m'est égal.*  
   Yesterday I hoped you would come; today I don't care.  
  
   *Quand je l'ai vu, j'ai été surpris.*  
   When I saw him, I was surprised (just at that moment).  
  
   *J'ai pensé à une bonne histoire.*  
   I thought of a good story.  
  
   *Il a semblé disparaître.*  
   He seemed to disappear (all of a sudden).  
  
   *J'ai senti une goutte de pluie.*  
   I felt a drop of rain.  
  
   *Tout d'un coup, j'ai voulu partir.*  
   All of a sudden, I wanted to leave.

**Meaning changes**  
  
There are a few verbs that have different meanings depending on whether they are used in the passé composé or imperfect. Note however that these verbs are usually used in the imperfect; the passé composé meaning is fairly uncommon.  
  
**avoir** - to have  
  
   imperfect - had  
   *J'avais de l'argent.* - I had some money  
   *Je n'avais pas assez de temps.* - I didn't have enough time  
   *J'avais faim.* - I was hungry  
  
   passé composé - had, got, received  
   *J'ai eu un accident.* - I had / got into an accident  
   *J'ai eu une bonne surprise.* - I got a nice surprise  
   *J'ai eu faim.* - I got hungry  
  
  
**connaître** - to know  
  
   imperfect - knew, was familiar with  
   *Je la connaissais bien.* - I knew her well  
  
   passé composé - met  
   *J'ai connu Michel hier.* - I met Michel (for the first time) yesterday  
  
  
**devoir** - to have to  
  
   imperfect - was supposed to (whether I did or not)  
   *Je devais partir à midi.* - I was supposed to leave at noon  
  
   passé composé - must have, had to  
   *J'ai dû le perdre.* - I must have lost it  
   *J'ai dû partir à midi.* - I had to leave at noon (and did)  
  
  
**pouvoir** - to be able to  
  
   imperfect - could, was able to (whether I did or not)  
   *Je pouvais mentir.* - I could lie / was capable of lying  
  
   passé composé - could, was able to, managed to; (negative) couldn't, was unable to  
   *J'ai pu mentir.* - I was able to lie  
   *Je n'ai pas pu mentir.* - I couldn't / was unable to lie  
  
  
**savoir** - to know  
  
   imperfect - knew  
   *Je savais l'adresse.* - I knew the address  
   *Je savais nager.* - I knew how to swim  
  
   passé composé - learned, found out  
   *J'ai su la solution.* - I found out / discovered the solution  
   *J'ai su nager.* - I learned how to swim  
  
  
**vouloir** - to want  
  
   imperfect - wanted  
   *Je voulais partir.* - I wanted to leave  
   *Je voulais plus d'argent.* - I wanted more money  
  
   passé composé - tried, decided to; (negative) refused  
   *J'ai voulu partir.* - I tried / decided to leave  
   *Je n'ai pas voulu partir.* - I refused to leave  
  
  
**Verbal constructions**  
  
Some verbs have particular constructions which, when referring to the past, are always in the imperfect:  
  
**aller** + infinitive (near future)  
   *J'allais étudier.* - I was going to study.  
  
**avoir** (with age)  
   *J'avais 18 ans.* - I was 18.  
  
**être** *en train de*  
   *J'étais en train d'écrire une lettre.* - I was writing a letter.  
  
**faire** (with weather)  
   *Il faisait beau.* - It was nice out.  
  
**venir** *de* + infinitive (recent past)  
   *Je venais d'arriver.* - I had just arrived.

The *passé composé* is a [compound conjugation](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/compound-tenses-and-moods.htm), which means it has two parts:

1. [present tense](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/present.htm) of the [auxiliary verb](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/etreverbs.htm) (either [avoir](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/avoir.htm) or [être](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/etre.htm))
2. [past participle](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/pastparticiple.htm) of the main verb

**Note:** Like all compound conjugations, the *passé composé* may be subject to grammatical [agreement](http://french.about.com/library/weekly/bl-agreement-cv.htm):

* When the auxiliary verb is *être*, the past participle must agree with the subject
* When the auxiliary verb is *avoir*, the past participle may have to agree with its direct object
* An **auxiliary verb**, or **helping verb**, is a conjugated verb used in front of another verb in [compound tenses](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/compound-tenses-and-moods.htm) in order to indicate the mood and tense of the verb.  
    
  In French, the auxiliary verb is either [*avoir*](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/avoir.htm) or [*être*](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/etre.htm). All French verbs are classified by which auxiliary verb they take, and they use the same auxiliary verb in all compound tenses. Most French verbs use *avoir*. The following is a list of verbs (and their derivatives) that require *être*:
* [*aller*](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/aller.htm)   to go  
    
  [*arriver*](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/arriver.htm)   to arrive  
    
  [*descendre*](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/descendre.htm)   to descend / go downstairs  
     (*redescendre*   to descend again)  
    
  [*entrer*](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/entrer.htm)   to enter  
     (*rentrer*   to re-enter)  
    
  [*monter*](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/monter.htm)   to climb  
     (*remonter*   to climb again)  
    
  [*mourir*](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/mourir.htm)   to die  
    
  [*naître*](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/naitre.htm)   to be born  
     (*renaître*   to be reborn, born again)  
    
  [*partir*](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/partir.htm)   to leave  
     (*repartir*   to leave again)  
    
  [*passer*](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/passer.htm)   to pass  
    
  [*rester*](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/rester.htm)   to stay  
    
  [*retourner*](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/retourner.htm)   to return  
    
  [*sortir*](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/sortir.htm)   to go out  
     (*ressortir*   to go out again)  
    
  [*tomber*](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/tomber.htm)   to fall  
     (*retomber*   to fall again)  
    
  [*venir*](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/venir.htm)   to come  
     (*devenir*   to become  
     *parvenir*   to reach, achieve  
     *revenir*   to come again, come back)
* These are all intransitive verbs of a certain kind of **movement**. You do get used to these verbs over time and one day you'll just know whether to use *être* or *avoir* without even having to think about it. But in the meantime, you might find it useful to use a [mnemonic device](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/etreverbs_2.htm).  
    
    
  **Notes**  
    
  **1.** In addition to the above, all [pronominal verbs](http://french.about.com/library/weekly/aa021900.htm) use *être* as the auxiliary verb as well:  
    
     *Je me suis levé.* - I got up.  
     *Il s'est rasé.* - He shaved.  
    
    
  **2.** For all verbs conjugated with *être*, the past participle has to **agree** with the subject in gender and number in all of the compound tenses ([learn more](http://french.about.com/library/weekly/bl-agreement-cv.htm)):  
    
     *Il est allé.* - He went.   *Elle est allée.* - She went.  
     *Ils sont allés.* - They went.   *Elles sont allées.* - They went.  
    
    
  **3.** Verbs are conjugated with *être* because they are intransitive (have no direct object). However, six of these verbs can be used transitively (with a direct object), and when this happens, they need [*avoir* as the auxiliary verb](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/etreverbs_3.htm).

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **French passé composé conjugations** | | | | |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| **AIMER** (auxiliary verb is [avoir](http://french.about.com/od/verb_conjugations/a/avoir.htm)) | | | | |
| j' | **ai aimé** |  | nous | **avons aimé** |
| tu | **as aimé** |  | vous | **avez aimé** |
| il, elle | **a aimé** |  | ils, elles | **ont aimé** |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| **DEVENIR** ([être verb](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/etreverbs.htm)) | | | | |
| je | **suis devenu(e)** |  | nous | **sommes devenu(e)s** |
| tu | **es devenu(e)** |  | vous | **êtes devenu(e)(s)** |
| il | **est devenu** |  | ils | **sont devenus** |
| elle | **est devenue** |  | elles | **sont devenues** |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| **SE LAVER** ([pronominal verb](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/pronominalverbs.htm)) | | | | |
| je | **me suis lavé(e)** |  | nous | **nous sommes lavé(e)s** |
| tu | **t'es lavé(e)** |  | vous | **vous êtes lavé(e)(s)** |
| il | **s'est lavé** |  | ils | **se sont lavés** |
| elle | **s'est lavée** |  | elles | **se sont lavées** |

**French Past Participle**

The past participle, called *le participe passé* in French, is very similar in French and English. The French past participle usually ends in *-é*, *-i*, or *-u*, while its English equivalent usually ends in -ed or -en. The past participle has three main uses in French:  
  
**1.** With an [auxiliary verb](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/etreverbs.htm), the past participle forms [compound tenses](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/compound-tenses-and-moods.htm) such as the *passé composé*:  
  
   *J'ai travaillé hier.*  
   I worked yesterday.  
  
   *Il est arrivé à midi.*  
   He arrived at noon.  
  
  
**2.** With *être*, the past participle is used to conjugate the French [passive voice](http://french.about.com/library/weekly/aa012300.htm).  
  
   *Le ménage est fait tous les jours.*  
   The housework is done every day.  
  
   *Ce film sera suivi d'une discussion.*  
   This movie will be followed by a discussion.  
  
  
**3.** Standing alone or with *être*, the French past participle may be an [adjective](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/adjectives.htm). Note that in some instances, the *participe passé* must be translated by the English present participle.  
  
   *Fatigué, je suis rentré à minuit.*  
   Tired, I went home at midnight.  
  
   *Le garçon déçu a pleuré.*  
   The disappointed boy cried.  
  
   *Le chien assis sur le canapé est mignon.*  
   The dog sitting (seated) on the couch is cute.  
  
   *Je ne vois pas d'homme agenouillé.*  
   I don't see a kneeling man.  
  
   *Ce livre est écrit en espagnol.*  
   This book is written in Spanish.  
  
   *Sais-tu si le débat est terminé ?*  
   Do you know if the debate is finished?  
  
  
**Note:**  
  
When used in the passive voice or as an adjective, the past participle needs to agree in gender and number with the word it modifies, following the normal rules of [adjective agreement](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/adjectives_2.htm). In the compound tenses, it may or may not need to agree, depending on certain factors - [learn more](http://french.about.com/library/weekly/bl-agreement.htm).  
  
   *La voiture est lavée par mon fils.*  
   The car is washed by my son.  
  
   *Les solutions proposées sont parfaites.*  
   The proposed solutions are perfect.  
  
   *Elles sont allées à la banque.*  
   They went to the bank.  
  
   *Où est Lise ? Je l'ai vue ce matin.*  
   Where is Lise? I saw her this morning.

The past participle of regular verbs is formed by dropping the infinitive ending of a verb and adding **é**, **i**, or **u** to -er, -ir, and -re verbs, respectively:  
  
[**-ER verbs**](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/erverbs_regular.htm)  
Verb   **parler** (to talk)  
Remove   **er**  
Add   **é**  
Past participle   **parlé** (talked)  
  
[**-IR verbs**](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/irverbs_regular.htm)  
Verb   **réussir** (to succeed)  
Remove   **ir**  
Add   **i**  
Past participle   **réussi** (succeeded)  
  
[**-RE verbs**](http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/reverbs_regular.htm)  
Verb   **vendre** (to sell)  
Remove   **re**  
Add   **u**  
Past participle   **vendu** (sold)  
  
  
Most irregular French verbs have irregular past participles:  
  
*acquérir* > **acquis**  
*apprendre* > **appris**  
*atteindre* > **atteint**  
*avoir* > **eu**  
  
*boire* > **bu**  
  
*comprendre* > **compris**  
*conduire* > **conduit**  
*connaître* > **connu**  
*construire* > **construit**  
*courir* > **couru**  
*couvrir* > **couvert**  
*craindre* > **craint**  
*croire* > **cru**  
  
*décevoir* > **déçu**  
*découvrir* > **découvert**  
*devoir* > **dû**  
*dire* > **dit**  
  
*écrire* > **écrit**  
*être* > **été**  
  
*faire* > **fait**  
  
*instruire* > **instruit**  
  
*joindre* > **joint**

*lire* > **lu**  
  
*mettre* > **mis**  
*mourir* > **mort**  
  
*offrir* > **offert**  
*ouvrir* > **ouvert**  
  
*naître* > **né**  
  
*paraître* > **paru**  
*peindre* > **peint**  
*pouvoir* > **pu**  
*prendre* > **pris**  
*produire* > **produit**  
  
*recevoir* > **reçu**  
  
*savoir* > **su**  
*souffrir* > **souffert**  
*suivre* > **suivi**  
  
*tenir* > **tenu**  
  
*venir* > **venu**  
*vivre* > **vécu**  
*voir* > **vu**  
*vouloir* > **voulu**