

Unit 1: The Sounds of French (La Prononciation)

Bienvenue to your first real dive into French! This unit is all about making friends with French sounds. It might feel a bit like tongue twisters at first, but trust me, once you get a feel for these sounds, reading and speaking French will become so much easier and more intuitive.

French pronunciation can be tricky because it has sounds that don't exist in English or Czech, and it also has some "silent" letters that seem to disappear! But don't worry, we'll break it down into manageable chunks. Think of it as learning a new musical instrument – you start with individual notes, then combine them into melodies.

Lesson 1: The French Alphabet & Accents (L'alphabet et les accents)

Thoughts: We're starting at the very beginning, with the ABCs! The goal here is to get comfortable recognizing and producing the basic sounds of French letters. Accents can look scary, but they're actually helpful guides for pronunciation.

Casual Introduction: Imagine you're learning a secret code. Well, the French alphabet isn't *that* secret, but some of its letters have special ways of being pronounced compared to English or Czech. We'll go through each letter, and then we'll meet the "accent marks" – those little hats and tails that sometimes sit on top of letters. They're not just for decoration; they tell your mouth how to make the right sound!

The French Alphabet (L'alphabet français)

Many letters in French are pronounced similarly to English or Czech, but some are quite different. Let's go through them!

- **A** - sounds like 'ah' (like in "father").
- **B** - sounds like 'beh' (like in "bed").
- **C** - sounds like 'seh' (like in "cent" or Czech "cesta"). *Before 'a', 'o', 'u', or a consonant, it's hard like 'k'. Before 'e', 'i', 'y', it's soft like 's'.*
- **D** - sounds like 'deh' (like in "dog").
- **E** - sounds like 'uh' (like the 'a' in "sofa" or Czech "e" in "pes" - often very light, sometimes almost silent, especially at the end of words). *This letter is tricky, we'll see it a lot!*
- **F** - sounds like 'eff' (like in "fan").
- **G** - sounds like 'jeh' (like the 's' in "measure" or 'g' in "gym"). *Before 'a', 'o', 'u', or a consonant, it's hard like 'g' in "go". Before 'e', 'i', 'y', it's soft like 'j'.*
- **H** - **Always silent!** This is a big one. It's like in "hour" in English, you don't say the 'h' sound.
- **I** - sounds like 'ee' (like in "machine" or Czech "i" in "bílý").
- **J** - sounds like 'jee' (like the 's' in "pleasure" or 'g' in "mirage"). *Very different from English 'j' or Czech 'j'!*
- **K** - sounds like 'kah' (like in "kite"). Not very common in French words.
- **L** - sounds like 'ell' (like in "love").
- **M** - sounds like 'em' (like in "mother").
- **N** - sounds like 'en' (like in "nose").
- **O** - sounds like 'oh' (like in "go").
- **P** - sounds like 'peh' (like in "pen").

- **Q** - sounds like 'koo' (like in "queen"). Almost always followed by 'u'.
- **R** - sounds like 'air' (this is the famous French 'r' – we'll go into detail in Lesson 3, but for now, try to make a soft sound at the back of your throat, almost like you're clearing it gently). *It's not rolled like Czech 'r' or hard like English 'r'.*
- **S** - sounds like 'ess' (like in "snake"). *Between two vowels, it often sounds like 'z'.*
- **T** - sounds like 'teh' (like in "table").
- **U** - sounds like 'ew' (this is a unique French vowel, we'll tackle it in Lesson 2!).
- **V** - sounds like 'veh' (like in "van").
- **W** - sounds like 'doo-bluh-veh' (like "double-V"). Rare, mostly in foreign words.
- **X** - sounds like 'eex' (like in "box").
- **Y** - sounds like 'ee-grek' (like "Greek I"). Can sound like 'ee' or 'y'.
- **Z** - sounds like 'zed' (like in "zebra").

Example Dialogue: (Not really a dialogue, more of a pronunciation drill)

Let's "pronounce" some letters:

- **A** (ah) - **B** (beh) - **C** (seh)
- **D** (deh) - **E** (uh) - **F** (eff)
- **G** (jeh) - **H** (silent!) - **I** (ee)
- **J** (jee) - **K** (kah) - **L** (ell)

Grammar Spotlight: The French Accents (Les accents)

These little marks above or below letters are your friends! They tell you how to pronounce a letter, especially vowels, or sometimes differentiate between words that are spelled the same. There are five main accents in French.

1. **L'accent aigu (é):** The **acute accent** is always on an 'e' and makes an 'ay' sound, like in "café" or "cliché".
 - Think of it like the "e" in Czech "mést" or English "say" without the 'y' glide.
 - **Example:** *café* (coffee), *école* (school), *été* (summer)
2. **L'accent grave (è, à, ù):** The **grave accent** can be on 'e', 'a', or 'u'.
 - On 'e' (è): It makes an 'eh' sound, like in "bed" or Czech "pes".
 - **Example:** *frère* (brother), *très* (very), *où* (where)
 - On 'a' (à) and 'u' (ù): It usually just differentiates words that are spelled the same, but have different meanings. It doesn't change the sound much.
 - **Example:** *à* (to/at) vs. *a* (has); *où* (where) vs. *ou* (or)
3. **L'accent circonflexe (ê, â, î, ô, û):** The **circumflex accent** (the "little hat") can be on any vowel. It often indicates that an 's' used to follow the vowel in older French (and often still does in English cognates!). It generally makes the vowel sound longer or slightly more open.
 - On 'e' (ê): Similar to the 'è' sound.
 - **Example:** *hôtel* (hotel), *forêt* (forest), *fête* (party)
 - **Cultural Note:** The circumflex often shows a historical connection! For example, French *forêt* has an 's' in English: "forest". French *hôpital* has an 's' in English: "hospital".
4. **Le tréma (ï, ü, ë):** The **tréma** (the two dots) tells you to pronounce two consecutive vowels separately, not as one combined sound.

- **Example:** *maïs* (corn/maize – pronounce "mah-ees", not "mays"), *Noël* (Christmas – pronounce "No-el", not "noel" like the English name).

5. **La cédille (ç):** The **cedilla** (the little hook) is *only* found under the letter 'c'. It changes a hard 'c' sound (like 'k') into a soft 'c' sound (like 's'), *even when followed by 'a', 'o', or 'u'.*

- **Example:** *garçon* (boy – "gar-son", not "gar-kon"), *français* (French – "fran-say", not "fran-kay").

Cultural Note: French is often considered a very precise language. These accents are part of that precision, helping to make sure words are clearly understood! Don't skip them when you write!

Exercises/Quiz:

1. Match the accent to its sound description:

- a) é
- b) è
- c) ê
- d) ç
- e) ï
- i) Makes 'e' sound like 'eh' (like English "bed").
- ii) Makes 'c' sound like 's' (like English "cent") even before 'a', 'o', 'u'.
- iii) Makes 'e' sound like 'ay' (like English "say").
- iv) Indicates two vowels are pronounced separately.
- v) The "little hat" - often means a historically silent 's'.

2. True or False:

- a) The letter 'H' is always pronounced in French.
- b) The 'J' in French sounds like the 'J' in English "jump".
- c) The 'é' accent makes the 'e' sound like 'ay'.
- d) The 'ç' accent makes the 'c' sound like 'k'.

3. Which word uses an acute accent (é)?

- a) *mère*
- b) *où*
- c) *école*
- d) *garçon*

Solutions:

1. a) iii, b) i, c) v, d) ii, e) iv
2. a) False, b) False, c) True, d) False
3. c) *école*

Lesson 2: Tricky Vowels & Nasal Sounds (Les voyelles et les sons nasaux)

Thoughts: These are the sounds that really make French sound like French! They require a bit of mouth gymnastics, but with practice, they'll become second nature. Focus on the analogies.

Casual Introduction: Okay, now we're getting into the fun stuff – the sounds that are genuinely new to most English and Czech speakers. French has a few special vowel sounds that will make your mouth feel a bit different. Think of it like learning to make a new facial expression! And then, we'll tackle the famous **nasal sounds** – where the sound comes out a bit through your nose. Don't worry, it's not a cold, it's just French!

Tricky Vowel Sounds

1. The French 'U' (like in *tu*): This is probably the most unique French vowel.

- **How to make it:** Purse your lips as if you're going to say "oo" (like in "moon"), but then, without moving your lips, try to say "ee" (like in "see"). The sound should come from the front of your mouth, almost like a whistling shape.
- **Practice:** Try saying "eeeeee", then round your lips for "ooooo", now try to do both at the same time: "yew" (but very pure).
- **Example:** *tu* (you - informal), *pur* (pure), *lune* (moon)
- **Contrast:** It's NOT like the 'u' in "cut" or "bus" (English), and it's definitely not like the 'u' in Czech "ruka".

2. The French 'EU' and 'OEU' (like in *deux, soeur*): These sounds are a bit like the German "ö" or a very rounded 'uh' sound.

- **How to make it:** Start by making an "oh" sound (like in "go"). Now, keep your lips in that rounded "oh" position, but try to say "eh" (like in "bed"). Your lips should stay rounded.
- **Practice:** Say "oooooh", then try to say "eeeh" with the same rounded lips.
- **Example:** *deux* (two), *bleu* (blue), *peur* (fear), *soeur* (sister), *fleur* (flower)
- **Contrast:** Not like English "e-u" (as in "eucalyptus") or Czech "eu" in "Euro", which is typically pronounced as "ev".

3. The French 'OU' (like in *vous*): This one is usually easy for English speakers!

- **How to make it:** Sounds exactly like "oo" in "moon" or "you."
- **Example:** *vous* (you - formal/plural), *jour* (day), *rouge* (red)

4. The French 'AI' and 'EI' (like in *maison, neige*):

- **How to make it:** Usually sounds like the 'eh' in "bed" or Czech "e" in "pes".
- **Example:** *maison* (house), *neige* (snow), *faire* (to do/make)

Nasal Sounds (Les sons nasaux)

This is where French gets its unique "sing-songy" quality. Nasal sounds are when the air escapes through your nose *and* mouth at the same time. The vowel gets nasalized, and the 'n' or 'm' that follows is often **not fully pronounced** as a distinct consonant. Think of it as "swallowing" the 'n' or 'm' slightly.

There are four main nasal sounds:

1. ON / OM (like in *bon*):

- **How to make it:** Round your lips like you're going to say 'oh' (as in "go"), and then let the sound resonate in your nose. Don't fully close your mouth for the 'n' or 'm'.
- **English comparison:** Imagine saying "song" but without pronouncing the 'g' or the full 'n' at the end. Or like the "on" in "on-ramp" but with the "n" more in your nose.
- **Example:** *bon* (good), *nom* (name), *maison* (house - note the 'on' sound!)

2. AN / EN / AM / EM (like in *banc*):

- **How to make it:** Open your mouth wide, as if saying 'ah' (like in "father"), and let the sound come through your nose. Again, the 'n' or 'm' isn't fully pronounced.
- **English comparison:** Think of the 'a' in "can't" (British English pronunciation) but with more nose.
- **Example:** *banc* (bench), *chant* (song), *temps* (time), *enfant* (child)

3. IN / AIN / EIN / IM / AIM (like in *pain*):

- **How to make it:** Smile slightly, make an 'eh' sound (like in "bed"), and let the sound go through your nose.
- **English comparison:** Think of "pain" but with the 'n' barely there and the 'ai' sound going through your nose. It's a bit like the "an" in "bank" if you hold your nose.
- **Example:** *pain* (bread), *vin* (wine), *main* (hand), *important* (important)

4. UN / EUN (like in *un*):

- **How to make it:** This is probably the trickiest one, as it's the nasal version of the French 'u' (from earlier!). Make that 'u' sound (lips pursed, saying 'ee'), and then let it resonate in your nose.
- **English comparison:** Very few. It's like the French 'u' sound, but nasalized.
- **Example:** *un* (a/an - masculine), *parfum* (perfume), *lundi* (Monday)

Cultural Note: Nasal sounds are a hallmark of French! Don't be afraid to try them. The more you listen to native French speakers, the more natural these sounds will become. Immersion (even with French movies or music!) is your best friend here.

Exercises/Quiz:

1. Which English sound is closest to the French 'U' (as in *tu*)?

- a) "oo" in "moon"
- b) "ee" in "see"
- c) A combination of "oo" and "ee" with specific lip shape.
- d) "uh" in "up"

2. Pronounce the following words and identify the nasal sound (ON, AN, IN, UN):

- a) *bon* (good)
- b) *vin* (wine)
- c) *enfant* (child)
- d) *un* (a/an)

3. Listen to a native French speaker say these words (e.g., Google Translate's audio feature or YouTube) and try to imitate the vowel sounds:

- *tu*
- *deux*
- *vous*
- *pain*
- *bon*
- *main*

Solutions:

1. c) A combination of "oo" and "ee" with specific lip shape.

2. a) ON, b) IN, c) AN, d) UN
 3. (No direct solution, this is a listening/imitation exercise)
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Lesson 3: Consonants & The Silent Letters (Les consonnes et les lettres muettes)

Thoughts: We've covered the tricky vowels; now let's clarify some consonants and, crucially, understand the concept of silent letters. This lesson is about making your French sound more natural and less "forced."

Casual Introduction: We're almost done with the sounds! In this lesson, we'll refine a few consonant sounds that behave differently in French, especially the famous 'R'. And then, we'll uncover one of French's biggest "secrets": **silent letters**. Yes, many letters written at the end of words simply aren't pronounced. It might seem strange at first, especially coming from Czech where most letters are pronounced, but it's a huge part of sounding authentically French!

Unique Consonant Sounds

1. **The French 'R' (like in *rouge*):** This is the sound that often makes people say, "Oh, that's French!"

- **How to make it:** It's a guttural sound, made at the back of your throat, similar to clearing your throat gently or a very soft gargle. It's much softer than the Czech rolled 'r' and definitely not like the English 'r'.
- **Practice:** Try saying 'k' or 'g', and then relax the back of your tongue, letting air pass through your throat. You might feel a gentle vibration. It takes practice! Don't stress about perfecting it immediately.
- **Example:** *rouge* (red), *Paris*, *parler* (to speak), *très* (very)

2. **Soft 'G' (like in *girafe*):**

- **How to make it:** When 'g' is followed by 'e', 'i', or 'y', it sounds like the 's' in "measure" or the 'j' in "mirage." It's the same sound as the French 'J'.
- **Example:** *girafe* (giraffe), *géant* (giant), *manger* (to eat)
- **Contrast:** When 'g' is followed by 'a', 'o', 'u', or a consonant, it's hard like the 'g' in "go" (e.g., *grand* - big, *goutte* - drop).

3. **Soft 'C' (like in *citron*):**

- **How to make it:** When 'c' is followed by 'e', 'i', or 'y', it sounds like an 's' (like in "cent" or Czech "cesta").
- **Example:** *citron* (lemon), *cent* (hundred), *ici* (here)
- **Contrast:** When 'c' is followed by 'a', 'o', 'u', or a consonant, it's hard like the 'k' in "cat" (e.g., *café*, *comme* - like).
- **Reminder:** Remember the **ç (cedilla)** from Lesson 1? That little hook *forces* a 'c' to be soft ('s' sound) even when it's before 'a', 'o', or 'u' (e.g., *français*, *garçon*).

Grammar Spotlight: The Silent Letters (Les lettres muettes)

This is a **major rule** in French pronunciation, and once you get it, reading French will make so much more sense!

Generally speaking, **most final consonants are silent in French**. This means if a word ends with a 'p', 's', 't', 'd', 'x', 'z', etc., you usually don't pronounce that last letter.

Example:

- *grand* (big - masculine) -> you don't say the 'd' sound: "gran"
- *petit* (small - masculine) -> you don't say the 't' sound: "peh-tee"
- *parle* (speak) -> the 'e' at the end is barely pronounced, often silent: "parl"
- *vous* (you - formal/plural) -> you don't say the 's' sound: "voo"

Common Exceptions (The "Careful" Rule):

While most final consonants are silent, there are a few exceptions that ARE usually pronounced. A helpful (though not 100% perfect, but great for beginners!) mnemonic to remember these is "C, R, F, L" – like "Careful"!

- **C:** *avec* (with), *arc* (bow)
- **R:** *bonjour* (hello), *mer* (sea)
- **F:** *neuf* (nine), *chef* (chef)
- **L:** *hôtel* (hotel), *seul* (alone)

Cultural Note: The concept of silent letters contributes to the flowing, melodious sound of French. Words often link together, especially when a silent consonant is followed by a vowel, creating something called "**liaison**" (linking). We'll touch on liaison more later, but for now, just focus on not pronouncing those silent final consonants!

Exercises/Quiz:

1. Which of these words likely has a silent final consonant?

- a) *chef*
- b) *grand*
- c) *avec*
- d) *hôtel*

2. How would you approximate the sound of the French 'R' to someone who speaks Czech?

- a) Like the 'ř' in "Praha"
- b) Like the rolled 'r' in "ruka"
- c) Like a gentle gargle at the back of the throat
- d) Like the 'r' in English "red"

3. Pronounce these words, paying attention to soft 'c'/'g' and silent letters:

- *girafe*
- *cent*
- *petit* (silent 't')
- *mange* (silent 'e')
- *français* (silent 's')

Solutions:

1. b) *grand* (the 'd' is silent)
2. c) Like a gentle gargle at the back of the throat

3. (No direct solution, this is a pronunciation exercise)

Key Takeaways for Unit 1: The Sounds of French

- **The French Alphabet:** Many letters are similar to English/Czech, but pay special attention to **J** (like 's' in "pleasure"), **H** (always silent), and the unique **U**.
- **Accents are Guides:**
 - **é** (acute): "ay" sound (like "café")
 - **è** (grave): "eh" sound (like "frère")
 - **ê** (circumflex): often makes a longer, open vowel sound (like "hôtel")
 - **ï** (trema): pronounce vowels separately (like "maïs")
 - **ç** (cedilla): makes 'c' sound like 's' (like "garçon")
- **Tricky Vowels require specific mouth shapes:**
 - **U:** Lips for "oo," say "ee."
 - **EU/OEU:** Lips for "oh," say "eh."
- **Nasal Sounds (ON, AN, IN, UN):** The sound comes through your nose, and the 'n' or 'm' is barely pronounced. Practice distinguishing these four distinct sounds.
- **Unique Consonants:**
 - **French R:** A soft, guttural sound from the back of the throat, not rolled.
 - **Soft G (ge, gi, gy):** Sounds like 's' in "measure."
 - **Soft C (ce, ci, cy, ç + a, o, u):** Sounds like 's'.
- **Silent Final Consonants:** This is a **HUGE** rule! Most letters at the end of French words are not pronounced (e.g., *grand, petit, vous*). Remember the "Careful" exceptions (C, R, F, L) that *are* often pronounced.

Mastering these sounds is like giving your mouth a new dance routine. It takes practice, but the more you listen and imitate, the more natural your French will sound! You've just built the phonetic foundation for speaking French – great job!