PHASE 1 · SENTENCE FOUNDATION · CHAPTER 4

-ER Present Tense

Level A1 | Priority Essential | Skills Read · Write · Speak · Listen | Goal Say it without thinking | Depth 4–6 hrs

Objective: Learn to use the **biggest verb family in French** — the **-ER** verbs — in the **present tense**, the tense you use for what's happening right now or what you do regularly (like "I work" or "I speak French"). You'll learn to **conjugate** these verbs — conjugate just means changing the verb's ending to match the person doing the action, so "I speak" and "you speak" end differently in French even though the meaning is close. Practise until the right ending comes out on its own, without stopping to think. Along the way you'll also meet a few small verb groups that tweak their spelling slightly, such as *manger, commencer, acheter,* and *appeler*.

COLOUR CODE — THE SAME ON EVERY PAGE

Sujet	who acts	Verbe	the action
Complément	what follows the verb	Petit mot	article, preposition, pronoun
Négation	the two pieces around the verb	Lien	what joins two ideas

Le matin, je ne me lève pas tôt parce que je travaille la nuit.

A dotted underline marks the letters that change to match something else — Elle s' est levée.

The stem never moves. Only the ending changes, and it changes to match the subject.

Je travaille à l'hôpital.

Tu travailles le week-end.

Nous travaillons ensemble.

Ils travaillent la nuit.

📘 Here's the good news: about **90% of French verbs** end in **-er**, and every single one follows **the same simple pattern**. Learn six little endings just once, and you can correctly use

📝 Notes

thousands of verbs — *parler, habiter, travailler, aimer, regarder...* and many more. Everywhere on this page, the **stem** — the part of the verb that never changes — is shown in navy, and the **ending** — the extra letters you add for each person — is shown in red. Tap 🌐 **EN** in the top bar to show English translations under every French line. Prefer paper? 📄 Open the Workbook & PDF — 100 practice questions + answer key. Want the whole chapter? 📘 Download the full chapter PDF — teaching guide + workbook + answer key, one file.

1 · Why -ER verbs are the key that opens everything

- **In one line: learn one pattern here, and you can already use 9 out of every 10 French verbs.** Every French verb has a basic dictionary form called the **infinitive** — this is the "to" form, like "to speak" or "to work" in English.
- Look at the last two letters of that dictionary form, and French verbs sort themselves into three families: **-ER** (parler = to speak), **-IR** (finir = to finish), and **-RE** (vendre = to sell).
- The **-ER** family is by far the biggest — roughly **9 out of every 10** French verbs belong to it.
- Even brand-new verbs that French invents today join this same family: *googler* (to google) and *télétravailler* (to work from home) both conjugate exactly like the verbs you're about to learn.
- So one pattern, learned once, lets you correctly use thousands of verbs — old and new.
- Nothing else you study at this level pays you back this much for so little effort.

The whole idea in one line: take the dictionary form and chop off **-er** → what's left is the **stem**, the part that never changes → then add one of six endings — **-e, -es, -e, -ons, -ez, -ent** — depending on who is doing the action (I, you, he/she, we, and so on). Master that, and you've mastered the entire chapter.

2 · The formula: stem + ending

- **In one line: three simple steps turn any -ER verb into six correct forms.** Step 1 — start from the **infinitive**, the dictionary form: **parler** (to speak).
- Step 2 — remove the letters **-er** from the end.
- What's left is the **stem**: **parl-**.
- The stem carries the meaning of the verb, and it never changes, no matter who is speaking.
- Step 3 — add the ending that matches the **subject** — the word for who is doing the action (*je* = I, *tu* = you, and so on).

- Follow these same three steps every time, and you'll never be stuck for a verb form.
- The table below builds all six forms of *parler* exactly this way, so you can watch the steps in action.

Subject	Stem + ending	Form	Meaning
je	**parle**	**parle**	I speak
tu	**parles**	**parles**	you speak
il / elle / on	**parle**	**parle**	he/she/one speaks
nous	**parlons**	**parlons**	we speak
vous	**parlez**	**parlez**	you speak
ils / elles	**parlent**	**parlent**	they speak

One French present covers three English presents. *Je parle* can mean "I speak", "I am speaking", or "I do speak" — all three at once. French has no separate "-ing" form for something happening right now; the one plain present tense does all three jobs by itself. So never build a word-for-word copy of "I am speaking" (~~je suis parlant~~ ×) — just say *je parle*, and the rest of the sentence makes the meaning clear.

3 · The six endings — memorise these once

In one line: six little endings, and they never change from verb to verb. Here they are, lined up in one row, one column for each subject. Read across from left to right, and say each ending out loud as you go.

je	tu	il/elle/on	nous	vous	ils/elles
-e	**-es**	**-e**	**-ons**	**-ez**	**-ent**

- These six endings are the same for every regular -ER verb you will ever meet.
- A **regular** verb is simply one that follows this standard pattern with no surprises — and almost every -ER verb is regular.

- So the recipe never changes: keep the same six endings, and just swap in a new stem for each new verb.
- That means each new -ER verb you learn costs you zero new grammar — only a new stem and a new meaning to remember.

4 · The silent-endings trap (crucial for the ear)

- **In one line: four of the six written forms sound exactly the same out loud.** Say these four out loud, one after another: **je parle**, **tu parles**, **il parle**, **ils parlent**.
- Notice that all four come out sounding identical: just **"parl"**.
- That's because the endings **-e, -es, -ent** are **silent** — you write them down on paper, but you never actually pronounce them.
- Only two forms out of six have an ending you can truly hear: **nous** (-ons, sounds like "on") and **vous** (-ez, sounds like "ay").
- Everything else is decided by spelling alone, not by sound.

Written	Said	Heard?
je parl**e**	parl	ending silent
tu parl**es**	parl	ending silent
il parl**e**	parl	ending silent
ils parl**ent**	parl	**ent is silent** — never say "parl-ent"
nous parl**ons**	parl-ON	✅ heard
vous parl**ez**	parl-AY	✅ heard

Why this matters — two things to remember: (1) When you **speak**, the little word right before the verb — the **subject pronoun**, the short word that says who is acting (*je, tu, il, ils*) — is doing all the work, because the verb itself sounds identical in all four forms. So pronounce that little word clearly; it's the only clue your listener has. (2) When you **write**, you must still spell the correct silent ending, even though nobody hears it out loud — a reader can see the difference between *-e*, *-es*, and *-ent* on the page. Getting the ending wrong in writing is a very visible mistake, so slow down and check it.

5 · A gallery of everyday -ER verbs

- **In one line: twelve useful verbs, one pattern you already know.** Here are twelve of the most useful everyday -ER verbs.
- Every single one of them conjugates exactly like *parler*: chop off **-er**, then add the same six endings you just learned.
- So the only genuinely new thing to learn for each verb is its **meaning** — you already know how to build its forms.
- Read the *je* and *nous* columns out loud a few times, and notice the same pattern repeating in every row.

Verb	Meaning	je form	nous form
habiter	to live (somewhere)	j'habite	nous habitons
travailler	to work	je travaille	nous travaillons
aimer	to like / love	j'aime	nous aimons
regarder	to watch / look at	je regarde	nous regardons
écouter	to listen (to)	j'écoute	nous écoutons
parler	to speak	je parle	nous parlons
chercher	to look for	je cherche	nous cherchons
trouver	to find	je trouve	nous trouvons
donner	to give	je donne	nous donnons
arriver	to arrive	j'arrive	nous arrivons
rester	to stay	je reste	nous restons
étudier	to study	j'étudie	nous étudions

6 · je → j' before a vowel (elision)

- - **In one line: *je* drops its "e" and glues onto the verb whenever the verb starts with a vowel sound.**
  - This little shrink has a name: **elision** — dropping a vowel letter and replacing it with an apostrophe, so two vowel sounds never bump into each other awkwardly.

- It happens whenever the verb right after *je* starts with a **vowel** (a, e, i, o, u) or with a **silent h** — an "h" that you write but never pronounce, as in *habiter*.
- In that case, **je** becomes **j'** and joins straight onto the verb, with no space.
- You already built this exact reflex with *j'ai* back in Chapter 3 — French does this everywhere, because it keeps speech flowing smoothly instead of choppy.

j'aime · j'habite · j'écoute · j'étudie

Never ~~je aime~~, ~~je habite~~ — always **j'aime**, **j'habite**.

7 · Liaison (word-linking) — nous / vous / ils + a vowel

- **In one line: a normally-silent "s" wakes up and sounds like "z" when the next word starts with a vowel.** This word-linking has a name too: **liaison** — French joins neighbouring words together in speech so that everything flows without gaps.
- The final **-s** of *nous, vous, ils,* and *elles* is normally silent, as you already learned.
- But when the very next word starts with a vowel sound, that silent -s wakes up and is pronounced like a **/z/**, stitching the two words into one smooth sound.
- So *nous aimons* is never said as two separate chunks "noo... aimons" — it comes out as one piece, "noo-z-aimons".
- The table below shows exactly how each pronoun sounds once liaison kicks in.

Written	Sounds like
nous aimons	nou-**z**-aimons
vous écoutez	vou-**z**-écoutez
ils habitent	il-**z**-habitent

8 · Negation (saying "not") with -ER verbs

- **In one line: to say "not", wrap the verb in a two-piece sandwich — *ne* before it, *pas* after it.** To make a French sentence negative — to say you *don't* do something — you don't just add one word like English "not".
- You add two small words: **ne** goes right before the verb, and **pas** goes right after it.

- The verb sits in the middle, like the filling inside a sandwich.
- Right before a vowel, **ne** shrinks down to **n'** — the exact same vowel-drop you just met with *je* → *j'*.
- One more small detail, shown in the last row of the table below: after a negative, the little words that mean "some" (*du, de la, des*) usually shrink down to a plain **de**.
- That's why *de la viande* (some meat) becomes *pas **de** viande* (not any meat) once you add the negative.

Affirmative	Negative
Je parle français.	Je **ne** parle **pas** français.
Il travaille ici.	Il **ne** travaille **pas** ici.
J'aime le café.	Je **n'**aime **pas** le café.
Nous mangeons de la viande.	Nous **ne** mangeons **pas de** viande.

9 · Questions with -ER verbs

- **In one line: French has three ways to ask a yes/no question — one easy, one standard, one formal.** Way 1, the easiest — say a completely normal sentence and simply raise your voice at the end, exactly like English "You're coming?".
- Nothing about the words changes at all. Way 2, the standard one — put the fixed phrase **est-ce que** in front of the sentence.
- It's a ready-made question starter (pronounced "ess-kuh") that means roughly "is it that...", and it never changes form — the rest of the sentence after it stays exactly as it was.
- Way 3, the formal one — called **inversion**: you swap the verb and the subject and join them with a hyphen (*tu parles* becomes *parles-tu*).
- This last way sounds quite formal and shows up mostly in writing, not casual speech.
- In everyday conversation, ways 1 and 2 do almost all of the work, so lean on those first.

Way	Example
Intonation	Tu parles français ?
est-ce que	Est-ce que tu parles français ?

Inversion *(formal)*	**Parles-tu français ? · Parle-t-il français ?**

- **One small sound fix to know:** with *il, elle,* or *on*, plain inversion would put two vowel sounds right next to each other (~~parle-il~~) — awkward and hard to say smoothly.
- So French slips in an extra **-t-** between them, purely to make the phrase easier to pronounce: *Parle-**t**-il ? Travaille-**t**-elle ?* That extra -t- carries no meaning of its own at all — it exists only to keep the sound smooth.

10 · The small spelling-change families (preview)

- **In one line: a handful of -ER verbs tweak their spelling slightly — but they still take the exact same six endings.** A small number of -ER verbs adjust their **stem** a little in some forms.
- Why bother? Purely so the spelling keeps matching the way the word actually sounds — French doesn't like writing one thing and saying another.
- For example, *manger* (to eat) keeps its soft "j" sound in the *nous* form by adding an extra **e**: *nous mangeons*, never ~~nous mangons~~.
- Nothing at all changes about the six endings themselves; only the stem gets a tiny spelling touch-up.
- For now, just skim the table below to recognise the six groups by sight — the full explanation and extra practice are waiting for you in the **Exceptions** tab.

Group	Change	Example
-ger (manger)	nous → **-geons**	nous **mangeons**
-cer (commencer)	nous → **-çons**	nous **commençons**
e→è (acheter)	je/tu/il/ils → **è**	j'**achète**
é→è (préférer)	je/tu/il/ils → **è**	je **préfère**
double (appeler)	je/tu/il/ils → **-ll-**	j'**appelle**
-yer (payer)	y → **i**	je **paie**

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