

Subjunctive (*Subjonctif*)

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The [subjunctive](#) is used normally in a subordinate clause (in other words, after the word *que* or some other conjunctions) where the preceding main clause requires the subjunctive. Like in English, French requires the subjunctive where the main clause expresses some doubt, wishing or emotion.

Expressions of doubt

- **douter que** to doubt that

- Je doute que vous fassiez vos devoirs.

I doubt that you are doing your homework.

[fassez is the present subjunctive form of [faire](#)].

- **ne pas croire que** to not believe that

- Nous ne croyons pas que le monde soit rond.

We do not believe that the world is round.

[soit is the present subjunctive form of [être](#)].

Note that the expression **croire que** does not require the subjunctive because no doubt is implied. Thus, we would say:

- Nous croyons que le monde est rond. (present indicative)

- **il est douteux que** it is doubtful that

- Il est douteux que vous arriviez à l'heure.

It is doubtful that you will arrive on time.

Note: Even though we express the action in the second clause in the future tense in English, we must use the present subjunctive in French.

- **il semble que** it seems that

- **il ne semble pas que** it doesn't seem that

- Il semble que l'école ne produise pas d'élèves intelligents.

It seems that the school isn't producing intelligent students.

Note: In English, "it seems that" doesn't seem to imply a lot of doubt. However, it implies some uncertainty and thus, in French, requires the subjunctive. The expression **Il me semble que... It seems to me that...** does not require the subjunctive. Presumably, this is because there is less doubt. Thus:

- Il me semble que l'école ne produit pas d'élèves intelligents.

This rule is still under debate. Please adhere to your instructor's direction if there is a conflict.

- **il est (im)possible que** it is (im)possible that
 - Il est possible que nous allions en vacances.

It is possible that we may go on vacation.

- **il se peut que** it is possible that
 - Il se peut que mes frères sachent faire la lessive.

It is possible (that) my brothers know how to do the laundry.

- **il ne paraît pas que** it doesn't seem that
 - Il ne paraît pas que l'hiver parte bientôt.

It doesn't seem that winter will be leaving soon.

***Note:** Because there is no future subjunctive, the present subjunctive serves to indicate the future meaning.*

- **il est faux que** it is false that
 - Il est faux que l'Indiana soit au bord de l'océan.

It is false that Indiana is next to the ocean.

- **il est incroyable que** it is unbelievable that
 - Il est incroyable que cet animal puisse parler.

It is unbelievable that this animal can talk.

Impersonal expressions of necessity

In French, impersonal expressions of necessity require the subjunctive in the subordinate clause. In English, an example of an impersonal expression of necessity would be: "It is essential that he finish the work." The subject of the main clause is "it." However, "it" doesn't refer to any person, place, thing or concept; it has no [antecedent](#). That is why the expression "it is essential" is considered impersonal. The rule is the same for the French equivalent Il est essentiel. Some common expressions of necessity include:

- **il faut que** (see [falloir](#)) it is necessary that
 - Il faut que ma voiture soit réparée avant de partir.

It is necessary that my car be repaired before leaving.

***Note:** The negative **il ne faut pas que...** does not simply mean it is not necessary that... The statement:*

- Il ne faut pas que ma voiture soit réparée avant de partir.

means

My car may not be repaired before leaving.

Therefore, if someone tells you:

- Il ne faut pas que vous sortiez.

he is not saying

It isn't necessary that you go out.

He means

It is necessary that you not go out.

In other words, he is not offering a choice.

- **il est nécessaire que** *it is necessary that*

- Il est nécessaire que le défilé commence à l'heure.

It is necessary that the parade start on time.

[commence is in the subjunctive mood, however, its form is the same as the present indicative].

- **il est essentiel que** *it is essential that*

- Il est essentiel que mon collègue et moi finissions ce projet de chimie.

It is essential that my colleague and I finish this chemistry project.

- **il est important que** *it is important that*

- Il est important que vous votiez pour le meilleur candidat.

It is important that you vote for the better candidate.

Expressions of desirability and insistence

Most expressions of desirability or insistence in French, whether personal or impersonal require the subjunctive. Most of these expressions require the subjunctive even if the expression is in the negative. For instance, "I desire that you come" and "I don't desire that you come" would both require the subjunctive in French. Here are some of these expressions:

- **il (n') est (pas) bon que** *it is (not) good that*

- Il n'est pas bon que nous dormions pendant toute la journée.

It is not good that we sleep the whole day.

- **(ne pas) vouloir que** *(not) to want that*

This structure in French often causes many problems for introductory students because it is very dissimilar to English. In English we can say, "I want you to go to the store" which means "I desire that you go to the store." In French, it is impossible to use "want" in this way. To translate a sentence like that into French, one must say, "I want that you go to the store." And, such a structure requires the subjunctive. Note the examples below:

- Ma mère veut que je fasse mes devoirs.

My mother wants me to do my homework.

(literally) My mother wants that I do my homework.

- Nos amis et moi, nous ne voulons pas que le ciel tombe.

My friends and I, we don't want the sky to fall.

(literally) My friends and I, we don't want that the sky falls.

Just remember that when you're talking about something you want to do, you can simply avoid the

subjunctive:

- Je veux aller à l'école *is the same as* Je veux que j'aille à l'école.

*As long as the person(s) that are wanting are the same person(s) who are doing, just use **vouloir + the infinitive**. It is only when the person(s) wanting and the person(s) doing are different that the subjunctive is required:*

- Nous voulons faire du ski. *We want to go skiing.*

*The persons wanting (we), and the persons doing the skiing (we) are the same. Thus, use **vouloir + infinitive**.*

- Nous voulons que notre ami fasse du ski. *We want our friend to go skiing.*

*Here, the persons wanting (we) and the person doing the skiing (our friend) are different. Thus, use the construction **vouloir que** followed by the subordinate clause in the subjunctive.*

- **(ne pas) aimer que** *(not) to like that*

- J'aime qu'il ne pleuve pas.

I like that it's not raining.

- Vous n'aimez pas que votre ennemi vienne ce soir.

You don't like that your enemy is coming this evening.

- **(ne pas) désirer que** *(not) to desire that*

- Le président de la République désire que l'électorat le choisisse.

The President of the Republic desires that the electorate choose him.

- **il (n')est (pas) préférable que** *it is (not) preferable that*

- Il n'est pas préférable que l'étudiant rate le cours.

It is not preferable that the student fail the class.

- **préférer que** *to prefer that*

- Je préfère que tu n'éternues pas.

I prefer that you not sneeze.

- **(ne pas) insister que** *(not) to insist that*

- Le professeur n'insiste pas que nous rendions le devoir aujourd'hui.

The professor doesn't insist that we hand in the homework today.

***Note:** The verb **rendre** to give back, render is translated in this case as **to hand in**. In some cases, it can also mean **to vomit**.*

- **tenir à ce que** *to insist that*

- Vous tenez à ce que le travail soit bien fait.

You insist that the work be done well.

***Note:** **tenir à ce que** is an entire expression. It is not correct to say **tenir que**.*

- **exiger que** *to require that*

- Mes camarades de chambre exigent que je paie le loyer.

My roommates require that I pay the rent.

Note: **exiger** can also be used in the impersonal expression **il est exigé que** it is required that.

- Il est exigé que l'on stationne la voiture ailleurs.

It is required that people park their cars elsewhere.

Expressions of fear

In French, there are two principal expressions used for fear. Both of these expressions, when followed by *que* require the subjunctive and, when desired, the [pleonastic 'ne'](#). They are **avoir peur**, **de peur que** and **craindre**.

- **avoir peur que** to be afraid that; to fear that

- Le chat a peur que le chien (ne) le morde.

The cat is afraid that the dog will bite it.

- **de peur que** for fear that

- Elle se tenait immobile, de peur que la moindre émotion ne la fit vomir. (*Flaubert*)

She rested immobile for fear that the least emotion would make her vomit.

- **craindre que** to fear that; to be afraid that

- Je crains que ma fiancée (n')ait une panne de voiture.

I am afraid that my fiancée is having car problems.

Conjunctions requiring the Subjunctive

There are many conjunctions in French that require the subjunctive following them. It is very difficult to know which conjunctions require the subjunctive and which don't. Memorization is about the only sure way to get it right. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to reproduce an exhaustive list, but here are some of the most important:

- **à condition que** provided that

- Je t'accompagnerai à condition que tu me paies le voyage.

I'll go with you provided that you pay for my trip.

- **afin que** so that

- Téléphone à tes parents, afin qu'ils sachent où nous sommes.

Call your parents, so they know where we are.

- **à moins que** unless

- Il ne survivra pas à moins que les meilleurs médecins (ne) le soignent.

He will not survive unless the best doctors treat him.

Again, we find the [pleonastic ne](#) following this conjunction. Remember that it has no negative meaning

and is not obligatory.

- **avant que** before

- Nous ne partirons pas pour la Floride avant que mon pere (ne) sache où nous allons.

We will not leave for Florida before my father knows where we are going.

*The "ne" in parentheses is referred to as the **pleonastic ne**. It has no negative meaning and is only used in writing following a few conjunctions and expressions of fear. Its use is no longer mandatory and it is being used less and less, even in formal writing.*

- **jusqu'à ce que** until

- Tu ne peux pas recevoir ton diplôme jusqu'à ce que tu finisses tes cours.

You cannot receive your diploma until you finish your classes.

- **pour que** so that; in order that

- La ville a établi des limites de vitesse pour que les conducteurs ne conduisent pas trop vite.

The city established speed limits so that drivers would not drive too fast.

- **pourvu que** provided that

- Maudis-moi, pourvu que j'entende ta voix! (*Flaubert*)

Curse me, provided that I (can) hear your voice!

- **quoique** although

- J'ai bien aimé ce film, quoiqu'il soit un peu long.

I really liked this film, although it was a bit long.

- **sans que** without

- Il a fini le travail sans que son voisin (ne) s'en rende compte.

He finished the work without his neighbor realizing it.

*The **pleonastic ne** can also be used with this conjunction.*

*However, if there is no change of subject between the two parts of the sentence, an infinitive construction is preferred, in which case certain conjunctions take on a prepositional form (**pour, afin de, à condition de, de peur de, sans**); a few conjunctions (**quoique, pourvu que**) have no prepositional form, and their form remains the same when used with a repeated subject. So,*

- Je vais leur téléphoner afin de commander une pizza.

I'm going to call them to order a pizza.

- Tu pourras venir à condition de faire tous les préparatifs nécessaires.

You can come as long as you do all the necessary preparation.

but:

- Tu pourras réussir à cet examen pourvu que tu étudies!

You can pass this test as long as you study!

Indefinite antecedents

Probably the most interesting use of the subjunctive in French is in the case of an indefinite [antecedent](#). This is one of the few times that the subjunctive can exist in a sentence without the word **que**.

An indefinite antecedent exists when the object talked about, or referenced in the main clause is nonexistent or its existence is in doubt. This case comes about usually when talking about a search for something or someone with certain qualities. Here are a few examples:

- Nous cherchons quelqu'un qui puisse travailler indépendamment.

We are looking for someone who could work independently.

Remember: The main point of the subjunctive here is to indicate doubt or uncertainty about the existence of the person who can work independently. That person has not yet been located.

- Il ne connaît personne qui veuille venir à la fête.

He doesn't know anyone who would want to come to the party.

In this example, there is no one who wants to come to the party. Since such a person is nonexistent, the subjunctive is used. However, if there is someone who wants to go to the party, the subjunctive is not used:

- Il connaît quelqu'un qui veut venir à la fête.

He knows someone who wants to come to the party.

The main point here is that the person talked about does exist and is not theoretical. In such a case, use the indicative.

- Il n'y a rien du tout dans cette situation qui soit compréhensible.

There is nothing at all about this situation that is understandable.

Superlatives

A superlative is an expression of totality or uniqueness that, in English, is usually expressed with the ending **-est** and some other words. For example, words such as "greatest", "best", "most", "only" are examples of superlatives. When these equivalents in French are followed by **que**, they are normally followed by a clause in the subjunctive:

- Voilà la plus belle femme que j'aie jamais vue.

There is the most beautiful woman that I have ever seen.

- La seule voiture bleue que nous puissions conduire se trouve là bas.

The only blue car that we can drive is located over there.

- C'est la seule réponse qu'il sait. (I.e., a statement of fact.)

C'est la meilleure réponse que je puisse imaginer. (i.e., a statement of opinion.)

Concessive statements

The phrases **où que** *wherever*, **quoi que** *whatever*, **qui que** *whoever*, **quel que** *whichever*, and **si** + adjective + **que** *however*, are followed by the subjunctive:

- Où que j'aille dans la vie, je me souviendrai de votre gentillesse.

Wherever I go in life, I will remember your kindness.

- Quoi que tu fasses, ne dis rien à mon petit ami!

Whatever you do, don't tell my boyfriend!

- Si idiot que ce soit, rends-moi ce service.

However idiotic it may be, do me this favor.

Set expressions and commands

Certain set expressions are conjugated in the subjunctive:

- Ainsi soit-il! *So be it!*
- Vive le roi! *Long live the king!*
- Adviene que pourra! *Come what may!*

A sentence beginning with **Que...** followed by the subjunctive denotes a command or an exhortation:

- Qu'il parte tout de suite! *Let him leave immediately!*
- Qu'on me dise la vérité! *Let someone tell me the truth!*

Pleonastic *ne*

In certain subjunctive constructions, the false or pleonastic '*ne*' is used. this usage has mostly disappeared from spoken French, but you will still see it in written French. Be sure to recognize it for what it is and not immediately see a negative. if ***pas*** or any other second element of negation (***rien, jamais, plus***, etc.) is there too, however, you are dealing with a real negative.

- Elle est plus sportive que je ne croyais.

She is more athletic than I thought.

- Parle-lui avant qu'elle ne parte.

Talk to her before she leaves.

- A moins qu'il ne perde le match, on sortira au restaurant.

Unless he loses the match, we will go out to a restaurant.

but:

- J'ai peur qu'il n'ait pas fini le projet.

I am afraid that he hasn't finished the project.



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