

### How to learn French

Based on 20 years of experience teaching French as a Foreign Language, Nageeb Gounjaria shares 7 tips on how to learn French effectively.

#### 1 **Learn correct French pronunciation from the start.**

Although there are many similar roots, French remains distinct from other languages in many ways - even a shared word like "weekend" is written with a hyphen in French "week-end" and the pronunciation is given a 'French touch'. How then to master French pronunciation?

**Self-study** through audios and videos is helpful, especially for learning vocabulary and grammar. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to learn **French pronunciation** this way (unless you have an exceptional talent for mimicry). On the one hand, you don't get corrected instantly if you mispronounce. On the other, you may be deceived by your own ears and tempted to think you are on the right track. Moreover, audios and videos for learning French do not teach **listening skills**, considered the most challenging of the 4 language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). That is why beginner students often feel native French speakers talk too fast and lump many words together (liaison). The result: a cacophony of words that they are unable to follow. Why is that? Making sense of normal speech requires you to **learn how to listen** in the first place. Your ears are bombarded with a lot of sounds, and they need to know exactly which sound **to pick and decode**. They will analyse these sounds against a frame of reference (which must be learned). Otherwise, such sounds will simply be discarded as **noise and nonsense**.

**Classroom learning** remains more effective than self-learning, especially in small group situations. But students need to have realistic expectations; it is not always possible for a teacher to correct the pronunciation of individual students in a group. And it comes to no surprise that most untrained French teachers are unable to teach pronunciation and listening skills, and cater to the individual needs of their students.

**Learning French with a private tutor** is the best, tried and tested option. If you are on a tight budget, you can get a private tutor at least for the pronunciation part, just to be on the right track from the start. However, not any French tutor will do. You need an experienced French tutor with a sound **knowledge of rules governing pronunciation**, a professional French tutor who can tune up your ears, and teach you intonation, nuances and the overall musical pattern of the French language. Besides simulating realistic circumstances, your tutor can also give you the **cultural context**, an indispensable element in language learning.

With a private French tutor, you can also record your classes. You can use a freeware such as "Amolto Call Recorder" if you are learning online through Skype. In case you are learning face-to-face, you can use a voice recorder program on your smartphone. You can play back the recorded audio to listen to yourself and fix your mistakes until you get closer to the correct version.

### 2 *Memorise the gender of French nouns at an early stage.*

French, the language of passion, is also one of obsession, especially with genders in grammar. In French, all nouns are either masculine or feminine; there is **no neuter gender**. Native speakers generally learn which words are masculine and which ones are feminine from childhood, through trial and error, and getting corrected in the process.

For those learning French as a foreign language, learning the gender of individual words can be a daunting experience and it can take you a lifetime! Fortunately, there are some general rules that can teach you to make out the gender of French words with **90% accuracy**. Learn these rules to save yourself time and future mistakes.

### 3 *Build on what you already know.*

A lot of French words are similar in spelling and meaning to English (they are called cognates). By knowing these cognates, you can easily transfer and simply add a French pronunciation to them. Et voilà! You've got loads of French words that you never thought you knew and which you can put to immediate use.

### 4 *Find a logical approach to learn French easily.*

If you are not a young learner, it is easier to learn French by using a logical approach – mainly through an intelligent **organisation of information** and **memorisation techniques**.

Let's first look at one memorisation technique: **mnemonics**. One of the rules of French pronunciation is that, generally, the consonants D, S, P, T and X are silent at the end of a word. You can remember this rule through the wordplay **DESPOTIX** which contains all the silent consonants.

Let's now see how a better organisation of information can assist with learning. Take the gender of French nouns which have to be either masculine or feminine. **As a very general rule** (with some exceptions), words that end with either vowels (A, I, O, U but not E) or consonants tend to be **Masculine** whereas words that end with E (with some exceptions) tend to be **Feminine**. At an earlier stage, it is much more effective to remember this simple rule than to go through the tedious exercise of memorising the gender of each and every French word.

### 5 *Create your own French vocabulary notebook.*

It helps to create your own French vocabulary notebook. You can organise new words you learn under related **Themes** (e.g. Food) and further categorise then into **People** (boulangier, pâtissier), **Nouns** (baguette, croissant), **Adjectives** (délicieux, bon), Adverbs (bien, fraîchement) and Verbs (manger, boire).

For an easier retrieval of information, you can number all the pages in the notebook, and create an index containing a detailed list of the Themes with page numbers next to them.

### **6** *Set some milestones and take a French Proficiency Test.*

Learning for fun is exciting, but many give up along the way, especially when they hit a wall. To keep track of your progress and measure yourself at an objective international level, it is good to take a French proficiency test such as TEF, TCF, DELF or DALF. Taking these proficiency tests at various stages of learning will give you more confidence to keep learning and improving.

### **About the author**



Born in Mauritius (Ile Maurice) and growing up internationally, Nageeb Gounjaria has native bilingual proficiency in French and English. He has a Masters degree in Philosophy (specialising in Language and Culture) from the National University of Singapore, and he is also a Global Mobility Specialist, advising expatriates from Fortune 500 companies on the best learning methods. He regularly conducts teacher training in Europe, Asia and Africa. Nageeb is currently the Director of French Faster, an online French language school that specialises in Accelerated Learning and helps hundreds of students everyday to learn French faster, smarter and cheaper through blended e-learning.