

7 PRONUNCIATION RULES YOUR TEACHER NEVER TAUGHT YOU

Master the sounds that instantly make you sound more French without hours of drilling.

By Devy Baseley, French Speak Academy

BIENVENUE - WELCOME

You've learned vocabulary. You've practised grammar.

But pronunciation? That's often an afterthought.

And yet, pronunciation is the bridge between knowing French and being understood in French.

It's the difference between:

- being heard clearly versus being asked to repeat yourself
- feeling hesitant versus speaking with calm confidence
- sounding like a learner versus starting to sound more French

The 7 rules in this guide aren't random.

In fact, they're the little "behind-the-scenes" patterns native French speakers use daily, but most teachers don't explain.

Once you start noticing them, you'll begin to hear French differently and speak it more naturally.

In this guide, you'll find:

- ~ Clear, non-technical explanations of these often unknown rules
- ~ Real French examples and pronunciation cues
- ~ Practice at home tips for each rule
- ~ QR codes linking to audio version (with slow + natural-speed options)

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RULE 1: DOUBLE CONSONANTS

- WHEN SPELLING TRICKS THE EAR -

Seeing double consonants in a word - like **belle**, **mettre**, or **homme** - makes you want to press or emphasise the sound, as we often do in English.

Think of words like happy, butter, or address. In those cases, the double letters are your signal to add more weight or even length to the sound such as a heavier “p” or “t”, a sharper “s”.

In French pronunciation, in most cases, double consonants in French are pronounced just like single consonants.

That means **belle** sounds like “bel,” and **frapper** sounds like “fra-pé” i.e. no need to push or drag out the consonant. The spelling might double the letter, but your voice doesn’t have to.

French pronunciation wants smoothness, not emphasis. Double letters are more about spelling than sound.

But here’s the **hidden twist** and often unknow rule is that while the consonant itself sounds single, it can have a big impact on the vowel that comes just before it.

How Double Consonants Affect Preceding Vowels

When a vowel like E or O comes before a double consonant, it often opens up, shifting into a fuller, and more open sound.



a)The “E” Pattern :

When E comes before double consonants, it often takes on the open “eh” like the e in English “egg”:

- **elle** → “ell”
- **belle** → “bell”
- **cette** → “set”
- **mettre** → “met-rrrh”
- **lettre** → “let-rrrh”

In all other cases, the E (without any accents) stays neutral (the French schwa sound aka closed sound) – like in ‘**le**’, ‘**de**’ or ‘**peu**’ - because there’s no doubling to trigger the vowel shift.

b)The “O” Pattern :

When O appears before double consonants, it typically becomes the open “aw” sound, like o in “cot”:

- **bonne** → “bawn”
- **homme** → “awm”
- **pomme** → “pawm”
- **colle** → “kawl”

Compare with single consonants or different endings such as ‘**mot**’, ‘**vos**’ or when the vowels ‘au’ or ‘eau’ combine to sound like a single ‘O’. See the difference?

That double consonant doesn’t sound any heavier but it subtly reshapes the vowel before it.

Your Practice Tip

Choose words with “E” without accents or with “O” that you know and from the lists above.

Say them slowly, focusing on the vowel and pay attention to when they’re before a double letter.

You can mix them up as the contrast will train your ear to notice where the shift in the vowel is.

RULE 2 : ENDINGS IN -TION / -SION – FLOW THAT DOESN'T FEEL FAMILIAR –

Words like conversation or illusion feel familiar as you've seen them in English, so your brain says, "Great, I've got this!". But then you speak... and native French speakers look puzzled as they don't recognise the word you said.

In French pronunciation, these endings are soft, flowing, and often a bit nasal. Instead of the sharp, clipped "shun" sound like in English (con-ver-say-SHUN), French keeps things gentle and say it in 2 parts: 'see' then a nasal 'on' like the 'on' you've mastered to say 'bonjour'.

In French, as the stress falls much earlier in the word. The ending becomes lighter and keeps a soft "ee" before the final "on," giving it a more musical rhythm. It's not just pronunciation — it's intonation too.

Some examples:

- la conversation → "kon-ver-syah"
- la situation → "see-too-ah-syon"
- la décision → "day-see-syon"
- une illusion → "ee-loo-syon"
- la confusion → "kon-fyu-syon"
- la passion → "pah-syon"
- une action → "ak-syon"
- une fonction → "fon-ksyon"

When you practice these, you'll notice that the end isn't clipped, it's more lifted.

You'll feel your voice softening as the word finishes.



Your Practice Tip

You can use the above list and most words ending in *-tion* or *-sion* and say the word once in English, then in French so you can notice how your mouth moves.

When saying the French version, ensure you're hearing a clear 'ee' sound before the nasal 'on'.

RULE 3 : NUMBERS THAT MORPH

– CONTEXT-DEPENDENT PRONUNCIATION –

French numbers are simple once you've memorised them, right?

Un, deux, trois... You've learned and practiced them, repeated and listened to them, and maybe even counted in French to 100 sheep to fall asleep.

But then someone says a sentence in French containing numbers and suddenly you feel lost!

In French pronunciation, French numbers morph depending on context. Their pronunciation changes based on the word that follows.

You've heard of something called **liaison** aka a special little "bridge" that links words together especially if the second word starts with a vowel.

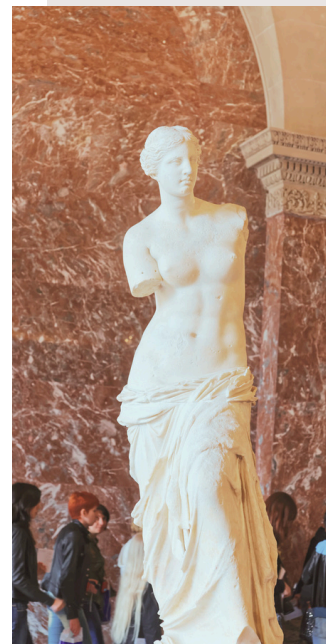
In English, a number sounds the same no matter where it lands. "Number Six" "Six apples." "Six children." No change.

But in French, this number can be pronounced 3 different ways so it can easily be missed which makes spoken French harder to follow and numbers harder to decipher.

- In number 'six' → it's pronounced "seess" (when it's alone, not followed by anything)
- In 'six apples'. → it's pronounced like the English "cease" (when it's before a vowel or silent 'h', with a Z liaison)
- In "dix children." → it's pronounced the English "see" (when a consonant, typically no liaison)

Some tricky numbers to look out for as they can be pronounced 3 different ways:

- 6 : *six* → "seess" - "*six chats* → "see shah" - *six enfants* → "seez_an-fahn"
- 8 : *huit* → "weett" - "*huit chats* → "wee shah" - *huit ans* → "wee_tahn"
- 10 : *dix* → "deess" - *dix heures* → "dee-zur" - *dix jours* → "dee zhoor"



Your Practice Tip

When learning or reviewing numbers, remember to say them slowly alone first, then without liaison, finally again with it. You can record yourself if you can.

Whenever you hear numbers said by natives on the news or in movies, try to repeat them. Whenever you read a French text, make sure you read the numbers out loud.



RULE 4 : FRENCH RHYTHM

– SYLLABLE-TIMED VS. ENGLISH STRESS-TIMED –

Even after memorising the vocabulary and learning how to make French sentences, learners often complain that it still feels awkward when saying it aloud.

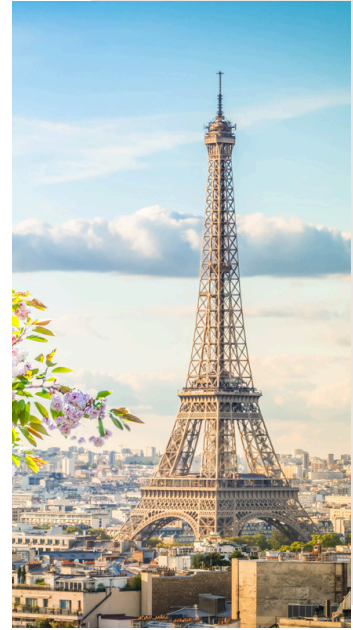
Chances are, it's not your words. It's your rhythm.

In French pronunciation, it's important to note that we follow a **syllable-timed** rhythm. That means every syllable is given equal space and weight. It makes it even, steady and almost musical.

On the other hand, English is **stress-timed** as some syllables are long and strong, others get swallowed or skipped.

So when you carry English rhythm into French... it doesn't quite work.

You may not realise you're *skipping* syllables in English but you are. Saying "chocolate" as "choc-late" or "family" as "fam-lee" is second nature.



Take a look at these words:

- Comfortable, in English "COMF-ter-ble" but in French → **Comfortable** is "com-for-tabl"
- Temperature, in English "TEMP-ra-cher" but in French → **Température** is "tem-pé-ra-tur"
- Interest, in English "IN-trest" but in French → **Intérêt** is "in-té-rêt"
- Laboratory, in English "LAB-ra-tor-ee" but in French → **Laboratoire** "la-bo-ra-toir"

English native speakers also naturally want to emphasize or *stress* certain syllables:

- Don't say "u-ni-VER-si-té" like English → in French: **Université** "u-ni-ver-si-té" (5 equal beats)
- Don't say "TEL-uh-fone" → in French, we say: **Téléphone** "té-lé-fon" (3 equal beats)
- Don't say "mag-NIF-ik" → in French, we say: **Magnifique** "ma-gni-fik" (3 equal beats)

In each case, the syllables flow evenly i.e. no swallowing, no rushing, just a balanced rhythm.

Your Practice Tip

Try to find a resource where you can hear the spoken French as well as read the accompanying text, choose a few sentences and clap each syllable as you hear them.

Next, try to clap as you speak them slowly. Finally, say them again without tapping and let your voice carry that steady rhythm. This will train your mouth and ears to keep the melody of French, even when you're not thinking about it.

When speaking in French, **imagine a metronome beating steadily** as each syllable should hit exactly on each beat.



RULE 5 : THE IN- PREFIX ILLUSION – ONE SPELLING, TWO SOUNDS –

You see a word starting with in- and assume it'll start with the same nasal sound every time i.e. that classic French nasal sound – in technical terms [ɛ̃] in the IPA i.e. International Phonetic Alphabet - like the word **un** or the final sound of **pain** or **matin**. But that's not always the case.

In French pronunciation, some in- words do start with that nasal sound [ɛ̃] like **invisible** → “ɛ̃-vee-zeebl” or **intéressant** → “ɛ̃-teh-reh-sã”.

But others, surprisingly, start with a pure, clear ee sound like **inutile** → “ee-nu-teel” or **innovation** → “ee-no-va-syon”.

The spelling is identical, but the pronunciation pattern depends on what follows the in-.

Why it's tricky for English speakers, this contrast changes whether you nasalise the vowel or not. This also makes a huge difference in how French sounds to native ears.

When IN- is Nasalised vs. Pronounced Clearly

a) Nasal IN- [ɛ̃] like **pain**

These are typically compound words or prefixes added to a base word.

Remember that the in- will be nasalised [ɛ̃] when followed by a consonant (except “n” or “m”).

- **invisible** → “ɛ̃-vee-zeebl”
- **intéressant** → “ɛ̃-teh-reh-sã”
- **intelligent** → “ɛ̃-teh-lee-zhahn”
- **impossible** → “ɛ̃-po-seebl”
- **infini** → “ɛ̃-fee-nee”
- **instable** → “ɛ̃-stahbl”



b) Clear i- [i] like **igloo**

These words begin with in- but the French do not nasalise the vowel. In fact, the “n” belongs to the next syllable, often due to Latin roots. You'll always know to pronounce the start of the word as ‘ee’ because the next syllable will start with n, m, or a vowel (a, e, i, o, u or y).

- **inutile** → “ee-nu-teel”
- **initial** → “ee-nee-syal”
- **innocent** → “ee-naw-sã”
- **innovation** → “ee-no-va-syon”
- **inattention** → “ee-na-ten-syon”
- **inadmissible** → “ee-nad-mee-seebl”

Your Practice Tip

I recommend you try to contrast pairs aloud to train your ear by taking one word from each type: Take this pair ‘**invisible** vs. **inutile**’, one starts with a nasal sound “ɛ̃-vee-zeebl” vs. *the other separates clearly* “ee-nu-teel”

You might not perfect it right away and that's perfectly okay as the goal isn't perfection. It's awareness.

This rule unlocks a huge amount of words and each time you spot it without falling into your default English pronunciation, you're retraining your brain for your French to sound more natural.

RULE 6 : THE TRÉMA (¨)

– VOWEL SEPARATION MARKER –

Ever seen two dots over a letter in French? Did you think it must be decorative or maybe a fancy spelling thing?

Then you might be pronouncing **mais** (but) and **maïs** (corn) the same way.

In French pronunciation, the tréma (¨) is a strict **pronunciation signal** which warns you to not blend these vowels. Instead, pronounce that vowel with the tréma fully, in its own syllable.

The difference is crucial:

- **mais** → "meh" – Pronounce one syllable, sounds like English "may" but without the diphthong glide and it means 'but' in English.
- **maïs** → "mah-eess" - Pronounce two distinct syllables, "mah" + "eess" and it means 'corn' in English.

The tréma is your cue to pronounce both vowels, clearly and separately. And skipping it not only changes the sound, it can change the word entirely from saying 'corn' vs. 'but'.

Without the tréma awareness, you're missing entire syllables.

Some common mistakes::



- **Noël** → many say "nohl" (one syllable) instead of "no-el" (two syllables)
- **naïf**, **naïve** → many say "nehf" or "nehv" (one syllable) instead of "nah-eef" or "nah-eev" (two syllables)
- **haïr** → many say "air" (one syllable) instead of "ah-ee-rrh" (two syllables)
- **canoë** → "ka-no-eh" - three separate syllables
- **Haïti** → "ah-ee-tee"
- **Jamaïque** → "zha-ma-eek"
- **égoïste** → "eh-go-eest" → many see 'oi' and pronounce it 'wah' but 'ee' is its own syllable.

Many names also contain the tréma too:

Joëlle → "zho-ell", **Noëlle** → "noh-ell", **Anaïs** → "a-nah-eess", **Loïc** → "loh-eek"

In each of these, the tréma stops the vowels from blending. It **preserves vowel independence**. as and that independence keeps French sounding clean and intentional.

Your Practice Tip

I recommend you try to pick a word with **un tréma** and write it out with separator lines to visually see the distinct unconnected vowels. For example:

- **Naïve** → Na|i|ve "nah-eev"
- **Poëte** → Po|ë|te "poh-ett"
- **Haïr** → Ha|i|r "ah-ee-rrh"

This small habit will gently retrain your muscle memory and over time, you'll pronounce these words more smoothly without even thinking.

RULE 7 : STOP THE SLIDE

– MASTERING PURE FRENCH VOWELS –

When you see a familiar looking word - like **café**, **menu**, **vidéo** - then pronounce it like you would in English, it feels natural, of course. But you might feel like something's... off, not wrong exactly... Just not quite French.

In **French pronunciation**, French vowels are short and contained. Unlike English, they don't stretch or glide. English loves long vowel sounds and many words turn one vowel into two without even noticing: go becomes "goh-uh", say becomes "say-ee", my becomes "mah-ee" and boy becomes "boh-ee".

In French, this kind of vowel glide (called a 'diphthong') instantly signals "English speaker." Even when you get the right letters, adding that unconscious extra sound can make a native French speaker pause or switch to English. Try to remember that in French, clarity comes from stillness. Every vowel lands like a short and clean bell tone without sliding into a second sound.

Glided vs. Pure vowels - Confidence Comes from Doing Less, Not More

Here's how English pronunciation habits sneak in and get in the way of pronouncing these lookalike words aka cognates. This is a mindset shift as much as a pronunciation rule. When you glide vowels in French, you may feel expressive. But to a French ear, that movement feels "off". A short, pure vowel often sounds more native than a stretched or expressive one.

So let's practice these:

- **La sécurité** → "sé-ku-ree-té" (English speakers may say "say-cue-ree-tay")
- **La qualité** → "ka-lee-té" (English speakers may say "kwah-lee-tay")
- **La curiosité** → "ku-rio-zee-té" (English speakers may say "kyoo-ree-oh-see-tay")
- **Le casino** → "ka-zee-no" (English speakers may say "ka-see-know")
- **Un piano** → "pya-no" (English speakers may say "pee-ahn-know")
- **Un bureau** → "bu-ro" (English speakers may say "byoo-roe")
- **Un café** → "ka-fé" (English speakers may say "kaff-fay")
- **Le menu** → "muh-nu" (English speakers may say "men-you")
- **La photo** → "foh-toh" (English speakers may say "faux-toe")
- **Le gâteau** → "ga-toh" (English speakers may say "gah-toe")

See the pattern? The English versions *add* motion usually an "ay", "wah", "ee" or "yoo" sound. The French versions stay short and still.

Your Practice Tip

To practice this lesser-known rule, pick 3 French words you already know (e.g. **idée**, **bureau**, **photo**). First, you can say them the "English way" out loud. Secondly, say them again, slowly and still. Remember to focus on keeping your vowel short i.e. no sliding or adding extra sounds. Your mouth and ears will soon remember the difference.

WHAT TO DO NEXT?—

Understanding and applying these 7 rules is a big step so I'd like to say: **Bravo!** You've just learned the kind of pronunciation details that most learners never get taught. They're the reason the French sound smooth and musical when they speak.

But the real transformation?

That happens when you stop doubting yourself and start hearing yourself speak French clearly... all without second-guessing, without the guesswork, and without dreading the speed of native spoken French. And that's exactly what we do inside Pronounce & Understand French Better. If you choose to join us, throughout my guided 12-week step-by-step program, you'll...

★ Go from guessing to decoding.

Instead of panicking when French blurs together, you'll **finalement** catch the words in real time and know exactly what's being said.

★ Turn pronunciation from stressful to automatic.

No more repeating yourself three times or switching to English, you'll speak with confidence and use **la prononciation française** that lands naturally the first time.

★ Build muscle memory, not just “knowledge.”

Through short twice-weekly practices, **vos oreilles** (your ears) will rewire themselves so speaking French feels easier with each week of the program and beyond.



★ Hear the difference in your own voice.

With audio comparisons and my guidance, you'll spot **du progrès** you never noticed before and gain confidence every time you open your mouth.

★ Move from “classroom French” to real-life flow.

You'll practise with authentic speed, rhythm, and connected speech the way natives actually talk.

★ Walk away confident, not self-conscious.

By the end of 12-week of **ce programme** (includes 24 bite-sized video lessons), you'll be ready for **des conversations** where you are understood clearly and can understand more French than ever before.

If this guide gave you some new clarity around how French really sounds, just imagine what's **possible** with my support, expert teaching, and a step-by-step approach.

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À bientôt,
Devy Baseley
Founder and Head teacher, French Speak Academy