

The Passé Composé: the past tense

- The passé composé is a **compound tense**.
- It is made up of two parts: auxiliary verb and a past participle.

Categories:

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Construction

Present tense of auxilliary verb avoir or être	+	past participle.
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The passé composé with avoir

The past participle of regular verbs is formed by:

1. Dropping the infinitive ending er/ir/re
2. Adding a new ending:

-ER verbs	é
-IR verbs	i
-RE verbs	u

Examples

J'ai travaillé hier	I worked yesterday
Il a choisi un bon livre.	He chose a good book
Ils ont vendu leur maison.	They sold their house.
J'ai regardé	I watched

Irregular past participles

There are many irregular past participles.

Some rules:

- some –ir/ire verbs end in “u”
- some –ir verbs end in “ert”

Present	English	Passé compose
<i>boire</i>	to drink	<i>bu</i>
<i>croire</i>	to believe	<i>cru</i>
<i>mettre</i>	to put	<i>mis</i>
<i>apprendre</i>	to learn	<i>appris</i>
<i>offrir</i>	to offer	<i>offert</i>
<i>devoir</i>	to have to	<i>dû</i>
<i>voir</i>	to see	<i>vu</i>
<i>faire</i>	to do/make	<i>fait</i>
<i>ouvrir</i>	to open	<i>ouvert</i>
<i>être</i>	to be	<i>été</i>
<i>avoir</i>	to have	<i>eu</i>
<i>vivre</i>	to live	<i>vécu</i>
<i>vouloir</i>	to want	<i>voulou</i>
<i>recevoir</i>	to receive	<i>reçu</i>
<i>dire</i>	to say	<i>dit</i>
<i>lire</i>	to read	<i>lu</i>
<i>pouvoir</i>	to be able	<i>pu</i>
<i>venir</i>	to come	<i>venu</i>
<i>écrire</i>	to write	<i>écrit</i>

Agreement with gender/number

Past participles of verbs that use avoir as their helping verb agree in number and gender with a preceding direct-object noun or pronoun.

FEMININE PRONOUNS:	add an -e
PLURAL PRONOUNS	add an -s unless past participle already ends in -s

Examples

La mousse Je l'ai préparée hier	The mousse? I prepared it yesterday
Voici les trophées que mon fils a reçus	Here are the trophies that my son received
Je ne me rappelle pas les bus que nous avons pris	I don't remember the buses we took

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Questions in the passé composé

RULE: invert the auxiliary verb any related pronouns preceding it with the subject pronoun, and add a hyphen.

- Try to avoid using with je I; instead, use est-ce que to form the question.
- WHEN USING AVOIR: a -t- must be added when the subject is il or elle.
- The negatives construction ne + pas/rien etc are placed either side of the hyphenation construction.

Useful words for constructing questions in the past tense:

déjà	already
quand	when
vous avez/tu as	you have...
vous n'avez jamais	have you never...
vous avez...pour la première fois quand	when did you first..
vous avez...pour la dernière fois quand	when did you last...

Examples

As-tu oublié?	Did you forget?
Lui a-t-elle parlé?	Did she speak to him?
Y est-elle arrivée?	Did she arrive there?
Est-ce que j'ai tort?	Am I wrong?
N'a-t-il pas vu ce film?	Hasn't he seen this movie?
Vous êtes-vous préparé e s ?	Did you prepare yourself [yourselves]?
Ne s'est-elle pas levée?	Didn't she get up?
Vous avez déjà acheté quelque chose pour ce soir ?	Have you already bought something for this evening ?

PASSÉ COMPOSÉ WITH ÊTRE

Only 16 verbs plus derivative forms of those verbs PLUS all reflexive verbs use être.

The 16 verbs generally refer to motion, travel or change of place, e.g. going in/out/up/down or remaining.

TO ARRIVE | TO LEAVE

TO ENTER | TO EXIT

TO CLIMB | TO DESCEND | TO FALL

TO GO | TO COME

TO BE BORN | TO DIE

The verbs can be remembered with the anagram **DR & MS VANDERTRAMP**:

D	evenir	to become	devenu
	rentrer	to return	rentré(e)
R			
M	mourir	to die	mort(e)
	sortir	to go out	sorti(e)
S			
V	venir	to come	venu
	arriver	to arrive	arrivé
A	naître	to be born	né(e)
N	descendre	to go down	descendu
D	entrer	to enter	entré(e)
E	rester	to remain	resté(e)
R	tomber	to fall	tombé(e)
T	retourner	to return	retourné(e)
R	aller	to go	allé(e)
A	monter	to go up	monté(e)
M	partir	to leave	parti(e)
P	passer	to pass by	passé(e)

Also try remembering these tunes/sequences

- *allé, arrivé, venu, revenu, entré, rentré, descendu, devenu, sorti, parti, resté, retourné, monté, tombé, né et mort.*
- *Aller, arriver, entrer, rentrer, rester, retourner, tomber, monter, descendre, partir, sortir, venir, devenir, revenir, naître, mourir, et passer par. Ces dix-sept verbes sont conjugués avec le verbe être au passé composé. Yé!*

Important rule re verb agreement

- When être is the helping verb, the past participle must agree in number and gender with the subject.
- Rule: add an -e for a feminine subject and -s for a plural subject

Examples

Il est rentré	He returned home
Elle est née en juin	She was born in June
Nous sommes revenus hier	We came back yesterday
Elles sont tombées	They fell feminine, plural
Nous sont venues	We came

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Verbs that use both être or avoir

Some verbs that usually take être can use **use avoir when the sentence contains a direct object.**

rentrer	to bring in
sortir	to take out
descendre	to take down
retourner	to turn over
monter	to take up
passer	to spend by

The action isn't 'happening' to the doer, rather being 'done' to something else by the doer.

Examples

Je suis descendu.	I went downstairs
Je suis descendu du train.	I got off the train
J'ai descendu le livre.	I took the book down
Il est monté.	He went upstairs
Il a monté ses bagages.	He took his luggage upstairs
Il est passé par l'école.	He passed by the school
Il a passé une heure là-bas.	He spent an hour there
Ils sont rentrés tard.	They came home late
Ils ont rentré le chien.	They brought in the dog
Elle est retournée à Nice.	She returned to Nice
Elle a retourné la lettre.	She turned over the letter
Je suis sortie.	I went out
J'ai sorti mon argent.	I took out my money

The passé composé with reflexive verbs

****RULE: reflexive verbs use être****

- When the **reflexive pronoun is also the direct object**, the past participle agrees with the reflexive pronoun.
- When the **reflexive pronoun is the indirect object** and, thus, the direct object comes after the verb, there is no agreement of the past participle with the reflexive pronoun.

Examples

Direct object	Il s'est levé à six heures	He got up at six o'clock
Direct object	Elle s'est lavée	She washed herself
Indirect object	Elle s'est lavé la figure	She washed her face

Negating in the passé composé

Rule: put the negative expression around the conjugated auxiliary verb and any pronouns that precede it.

Examples

Je n'ai pas fini mon dîner.	I haven't finished my dinner
Il n'a rien découvert.	He discovered nothing
Elle n'y est pas restée longtemps.	She didn't stay there a long time
Elles ne se sont jamais maquillées.	They never put on makeup