

MASTERING THE VERB SAVOIR IN FRENCH



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Mastering the Verb Savoir in French

The French verb *savoir* is one of the most useful and important verbs in the French language. Whether you're talking about knowing a fact, discovering something new, or explaining how to do something, *savoir* is the verb you need. However, its usage can sometimes feel confusing. Its meaning changes depending on the tense. For example, did you know that *savoir* in the passé composé means "to find out," while in the imperfect, it simply means "to know"?

In this lesson, we'll break down *savoir* step by step, showing how it works in the present, passé composé, imperfect, and present conditional tenses. We'll also point out a key feature of this verb: when followed by an infinitive, it doesn't need a preposition like *à* or *de*.

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Present Tense

In the present tense, *savoir* conveys the idea of knowing facts or information, or knowing how to do something. When followed directly by an infinitive, it means 'to know how to' perform an action.

Examples

Person	Conjugation	Example
Je	sais	Je sais nager. I know how to swim.
Tu	sais	Tu sais la réponse. You know the answer.
Il/Elle/On	sait	Il sait lire. He knows how to read.
Nous	savons	Nous savons la vérité. We know the truth.

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Vous	savez	Vous savez conduire. You know how to drive.
Il/Elle/On	sait	Il sait conduire. He knows how to drive.

Passé Composé

In the passé composé, *savoir* means “to learn” or “to find out” something for the first time. **This is a key difference from its imperfect usage**, where it means “to know” in an ongoing or habitual sense.

Examples

Person	Conjugation	Example
J'	ai su	J'ai su la nouvelle hier. I found out the news yesterday.
Tu	as su	Tu as su la vérité. You found out the truth.

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Il/Elle/On	a su	Elle a su quoi faire. She found out what to do.
Nous	avons su	Nous avons su qu'il venait. We found out he was coming.
Vous	avez su	Vous avez su la réponse. You found out the answer.
Ils/Elles	ont su	Ils ont su le résultat. They found out the result.

Imperfect

In the imperfect tense, *savoir* refers to an ongoing state of knowing something in the past. **This contrasts with the passé composé**, which refers to discovering or learning something.

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Examples

Person	Conjugation	Example
Je	savais	Je savais qu'il était là. I knew he was there.
Tu	savais	Tu savais son nom. You knew his name.
Il/Elle/On	savait	Elle savait jouer du piano. She knew how to play the piano.
Nous	savions	Nous savions la réponse. We knew the answer.
Vous	saviez	Vous saviez quoi dire. You knew what to say.

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Ils/Elles	savaient	Ils savaient où aller. They knew where to go.
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Present Conditional

In the present conditional, *savoir* is used to express a hypothetical ability or knowledge. It often translates as 'would know' or 'would know how to' in English.

Examples

Person	Conjugation	Example
Je	saurais	Je saurais quoi dire. I would know what to say.
Tu	saurais	Tu saurais comment réagir. You would know how to react.
Il/Elle/On	saurait	Elle saurait parler français.

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		She would know how to speak French.
Nous	saurions	Nous saurions résoudre ce problème. We would know how to solve this problem.
Vous	sauriez	Vous sauriez expliquer cela. You would know how to explain that.
Ils/Elles	sauraient	Ils sauraient répondre. They would know how to answer.

Summary of Meanings by Tense

Present: To know facts or how to do something.

Passé Composé: To learn or find out something for the first time.

Imperfect: To know something in an ongoing or habitual way in the past.

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Present Conditional: To know hypothetically or to express what one would know.

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