

WHY «JE NE SAVAIS JAMAIS» IS INCORRECT IN FRENCH



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You Can't Say “Je ne savais jamais” to Mean “I Never Knew”

If you want to say “I never knew” in French, your first instinct might be to say:

X Je ne savais jamais

...but this doesn't work in French.

Instead, you have two options. Be careful though, because **they don't mean the same thing**:

- ✓ Je ne savais pas (imperfect)
- ✓ Je n'ai jamais su (passé composé)

Let's explore why, using a clear comparison of *l'imparfait* vs. *le passé composé*, and how negation works with them.

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Two Past Tenses in French

The Imperfect

Used for describing ongoing states, habits, or conditions in the past, setting the scene or giving background info.

Je savais la réponse.

I knew the answer. (for some time)

Le Passé Composé

Used for completed actions in the past and events that happened at a specific point.

J'ai su la réponse.

I found out the answer. (at a moment in time)

Why “Je ne savais jamais” Is Incorrect

Here’s the problem: “Jamais” is used to express “never”, meaning not even once.

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The imparfait (as in savais) is not about individual events. It describes ongoing situations or repeated habits.

✗ “Je ne savais jamais” tries to mix “never even once” with a tense that means “something lasted over time”, and that doesn't make sense in French.

It's like saying “I was never knowing”, and that’s awkward.

Maybe You Can Say “Je n’ai jamais su” Instead

This version uses the passé composé, which is the correct tense for expressing something that didn’t happen even once as a single, completed event (or the absence of it). It means you never found out about something.

✓ Je n’ai jamais su...

✓ I never found out...

This phrase doesn’t mean “I never knew” (which would be the imperfect), but rather:

There was never a moment when I discovered or learned it.

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That's the real meaning of "never knew" in English:

I never came to know it. (never learned it / found out)

Je ne l'ai jamais su.

Useful Tips

If you want to say "I never knew", use the imperfect with **PAS** instead of **JAMAIS**: Je ne savais pas! I didn't know!

If you want to say "I never found out," you should use passé composé in French with **JAMAIS**: Je n'ai jamais su!

Compare the Two in Context

English	X Incorrect	✓ Correct	Explanation
I never knew her name.	Je ne savais jamais son nom.	Je ne savais pas son nom.	"Savais" = ongoing state, but "never" means it never happened, so the imperfect doesn't work
I never found out her	Je ne savais jamais son	Je n'ai jamais su son nom.	"Never" = not even once,

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name.	nom.		so it needs the passé composé
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Use The Imperfect With “Pas”

You can translate the following sentences however you like in English (use “never” if you want to), but you can’t use “jamais” in French.

Elle ne savait pas quoi faire.

She didn’t know (never knew) what to do.

Ils ne savaient pas que c’était dangereux.

They didn’t know (never knew) it was dangerous.

Use Le Passé Composé With “Jamais”

Il n’a jamais su que je l’aimais.

He never found out that I loved him.

Nous n’avons jamais su la vérité.

We never found out the truth.

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