

Devoir vs Falloir



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Both *devoir* and *falloir* express necessity, obligation, or something required, but they are not interchangeable. Each verb conveys a different type of obligation and follows its own grammar pattern.

1. Devoir - Personal obligation (I - you - we must...)

Devoir means “to have to / must / to be supposed to” and it applies to specific people.

It takes regular subjects: je, tu, il/elle/on, nous, vous, ils/elles.

It focuses on what a specific person must do.

Structure:

subject + devoir + infinitive

Examples:

- Je **dois** partir.
- I **must** leave.

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- Tu **dois** finir tes devoirs.
- You **have to** finish your homework.

- Nous **devons** économiser.
- We **must** save money.

- Il **doit** apprendre la leçon.
- He **has to** learn the lesson.

2. Falloir - General or impersonal obligation (only “il faut”)

Falloir is impersonal. It is always used in the form *il faut*.

It doesn't use other subject pronouns. Those forms do not exist.

It expresses general necessity, not tied to a specific person. Think of *il faut* as “it is necessary” or “one must.”

Structure:

il faut + infinitive

Examples:

- **Il faut** étudier pour réussir.
- **One must** study to succeed.

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- **Il faut** porter un casque.
- Wearing a helmet **is required**.

- **Il faut** faire attention.
- You/we/people **must** be careful.

3. When both are possible (and how they change the meaning)

Sometimes both verbs are grammatically correct, but they don't express the same idea.

One is about a general expectation, the other about a personal obligation.

A. General rule vs personal responsibility

- **Il faut** arriver à l'heure.
- **One must** arrive on time. (It's the general rule.)

- **Je dois** arriver à l'heure.
- **I personally must** be on time.

B. Giving instructions

- **Il faut** mélanger la pâte.
- **You have to** mix the batter. (general instruction)

- **Tu dois** mélanger la pâte.
- **You must** mix the batter. (specific command)

4. Devoir has additional meanings (not always obligation)

This is where English speakers sometimes get confused: **devoir** does *more* than express obligation. **Falloir** does *not* have these meanings.

A. Probability / supposition (“must” as guesswork)

- Il est 19h. Ils **doivent** être à la maison.
- It's 7 p.m. They **must** be home.

B. Obligation in the past (le passé composé vs l'imparfait)

- **J'ai dû** partir tôt.
- **I had to** leave early.

- **Je devais** partir tôt.
- **I was supposed to** leave early (but maybe I didn't).

The passé composé vs imparfait contrast often trips up learners. [Here's a lesson on mastering the verb *devoir* in different tenses.](#)

C. To owe money

- Je **dois** 50 euros à Marie.
- I **owe** Marie 50 euros.

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5. Falloir can be used with a person (but indirectly)

Even though *falloir* cannot be conjugated with normal subjects (*je, tu, nous*, etc.), you can express a personal obligation by [using an indirect object pronoun before faut](#), and here are some [quick tips](#) for using this verb.

This creates the structure *il me faut, il te faut, il lui faut*, and so on.

Structure:

il + indirect object pronoun + faut + infinitive
(OR with a noun)

Meaning:

“_____ need(s) to...” (for infinitives)

or

“_____ need(s)...” (for nouns)

This construction expresses a necessity that applies to a specific person, but in a way that feels less direct and often more polite than *je dois*.

Examples with infinitives:

- **Il me faut** partir.
- **I need** to leave.

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- **Il te faut** étudier.
- **You need** to study.

- **Il lui faut** se reposer.
- **He/She needs** to rest.

- **Il nous faut** réfléchir.
- **We need** to think about it.

These sentences sound neutral and impersonal (softer than using *devoir*.)

Compare:

- **Je dois** partir.
- **I must** leave. (direct, personal)

- **Il me faut** partir.
- **I need** to leave. (less direct, more neutral)

Examples with nouns:

- **Il me faut** du temps.
- **I need** some time.

- **Il lui faut** une voiture.
- **He/She needs** a car.

- **Il nous faut** plus d'informations.
- **We need** more information.

- **Il leur faut** un médecin.
- **They need** a doctor.

This structure is frequently used when talking about *needs* rather than strict obligations.

6. Very common tricky differences

A. “You must” vs “You should” nuance

Use **il faut** to sound **softer**:

- **Il faut** essayer.
- You **should** try. (less strong than *Tu devrais essayer.*)

B. Questions

- Qu'est-ce qu'**il faut** faire?
- What **should** we do? / What **needs** to be done?

- Qu'est-ce que **je dois** faire?
- What **must** I do?

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C. Negative forms

- Tu **ne dois pas** sortir.
- You **must not** go out. (It is forbidden.)

- **Il ne faut pas** sortir.
- One **shouldn't** go out. (It is not advisable.)

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