

Quel est vs Qu'est-ce que



Both **Quel est** and **Qu'est-ce que** translate as “What is...” in English, but they are used differently depending on the type of question. Understanding the structure is essential to sounding natural.

1. **Quel est** - Used with **être** + noun (a category, title, or classification)

Use **Quel / Quelle / Quels / Quelles** with **être** to ask about a **specific noun or category**. The pattern is:

Quel + être + noun ?

Examples:

- **Quel est** ton nom?
- **What is** your name?

- **Quelle est** ta couleur préférée?
- **What is** your favorite color?

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- **Quels sont** tes livres préférés?
- **What are** your favorite books?

- **Quelles sont** les capitales européennes?
- **What are** the capitals of Europe?

Key points:

- Always pair **quel** with **être**.
- The gender and number of **quel** must match the noun: *Quel est le problème?* - *Quelle est la question?*
- *Quelles sont les capitales européennes?*

Think about it like this: “Which [noun] is it?” You’re asking for the identity of a thing.

2. Qu’est-ce que - Used for definitions, explanations, or actions

Use **Qu’est-ce que** when asking **for a definition, explanation, or when the sentence involves a verb.**

Structure:

Qu’est-ce que + subject + verb ?

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Examples:

- **Qu'est-ce que** c'est?
- **What is** this? / **What is** it?

- **Qu'est-ce que** tu fais?
- **What are** you doing?

- **Qu'est-ce que** ça veut dire?
- **What is** the meaning of this?

Think about it like this: “*What is it that [subject + verb]...?*” It's for actions, explanations, or definitions, not naming a noun.

3. Informal spoken French

- **C'est quoi...?** is often used instead of *Qu'est-ce que c'est?* in everyday speech.
 - **C'est quoi**, ça?
 - **What is** that?
- Avoid trying to use **Quel est** with other verbs. It only works with **être + noun**.

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4. Reference table

English	French	Notes
What is your name?	Quel est ton nom?	être + noun = quel est
What is this?	Qu'est-ce que c'est?	Definition / explanation
What do you do?	Qu'est-ce que tu fais?	Asking about an action
What is the capital of France?	Quelle est la capitale de la France?	être + noun = quelle est

5. Easy way to remember

- **Quel est** always with **être + noun** = identity or category
- **Qu'est-ce que** is for **actions, explanations, or definitions** = “What is it that ... ?”

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