



11. Nouns: The magical world of noun gender

Why does grammatical gender matter in French and is there a way to identify which nouns are masculine and which are feminine?

Grammatical gender

Gender in language is a way of categorising nouns. The grammatical gender of some nouns may be logical i.e man and woman (*un homme* and *une femme*) but, in other cases, the gender of a noun may be impossible to guess.

If your first language is a non-gendered language, like English, the whole concept can be quite confusing and memorising the correct noun genders can be a struggle!

Why does grammatical gender matter anyway?

When starting a new language it could be tempting to ignore gender. It may have more of an impact on how you structure a sentence than you think (although, as you should know by now, my ethos is that making mistakes is how you learn!)

Articles

You need to know the gender of a noun to be able to pair it with a definite article (*le, la*), an indefinite article (*un, une*) or a partitive article (*du, de la*).

Pronouns

You will also need to know the gender to correctly choose which personal pronoun to use (*il, elle*) or when selecting an impersonal pronoun (see a future *Grammar Boost*).

Agreements

Then you have agreements to contend with when using adjectives with a noun. Example:

la chaise verte the green chair → *chaise* is feminine therefore we add an *e* to *vert*

Or, in certain cases, when using a past participle. Example using the reflexive verb *se laver* :

Juliette s'est lavée Juliette washed herself → Since *Juliette* is a feminine singular noun, *lavé* is made to agree by adding an *e*

Is there a way to identify noun gender?

I wish I was about to set out some hard and fast rules for you to help identify the gender of a noun just by looking at it but I am afraid gender classification is often quite arbitrary.

To help you make a logical guess when confronted, all I can offer you is:

1. Sets of endings
2. Sets of categories

Other than that my advice is to learn the gender as best you can every time you learn a new noun.

1. Guess a noun's gender based on its ending!

Noun endings can be a good indicator of its gender. Here are some endings you can use as a rule of thumb... along with a few exceptions to bear in mind. Note: There may be more exceptions than those noted.

Masculine endings – vowels

Noun Ending	Examples	Common Exceptions
-age	le fromage, le courage, le voyage	la page, la plage, l'image
-cle	le spectacle, l'article	la débâcle, la boucle
-ble	le sable, le câble	la bible, la table
-eau	le gâteau, le bateau, le manteau	l'eau, la peau
-ège	le piège, le collège	la Norvège
-ème	le thème, le phonème	la crème
-isme, -asme	le tourisme, le cyclisme, l'enthousiasme	None
-o	le numéro, le zéro, le loto	la dynamo, plus, abbreviated expressions like la météo (météorologie) as they are feminine words

[Edit](#)

Masculine endings – consonants

Nouns ending in a consonant tend to be masculine. Notable exceptions are **-sion**, **-tion**, **-aison** (see Feminine endings).

Ending	Examples	Common Exceptions
-ment	le monument, l'aliment	la jument
-t	le chocolat, le résultat, le trajet	la nuit, la forêt
-al, -ail, -eil	le hôpital, le travail, le soleil	

[Edit](#)



Compound nouns (nouns made up of two or more) are mostly masculine. Examples: *le tire-bouchon* (corkscrew), *l'arc-en-ciel* (rainbow)

Feminine endings – vowels

Endings	Examples	Common Exceptions
-ace	la glace, la face	le palace
-ade	la cascade, la promenade, la limonade	le stade, le grade
-ance, -anse	la tendance, la danse	No exceptions
-ence	la patience, la préférence	le silence
-ère, -ière	la misère, la cafetière	l'arrière, le derrière
-ée	l'année, la journée, la soirée	le musée, le lycée
-ie	la folie, la boulangerie, la chimie	le génie, le parapluie
-ouille, -eille	la grenouille, la citrouille, la bouteille	No exceptions
-té	la nationalité, la qualité, la nouveauté	l'été, l'invité, le côté
-tié	la moitié, l'amitié	No exceptions
-ure	la confiture, la voiture, la nature	le dinosaure, le mercure

Edit

Feminine endings – consonants

As mentioned above, noun ending in a consonant tend to be masculine. Notable exceptions are below:

Ending	Examples	Common Exceptions
sion, -tion, -aison	la télévision, la solution, la maison, la saison	le bastion

Edit



Most nouns ending in a silent *e* after two consonants are feminine. Example: *la botte* (boot), *la couronne* (crown), *la terre* (earth), *la masse* (mass) Exceptions: *le squelette* (skeleton), *le verre* (glass), *le parterre* (flowerbed)

2. Guess a noun's gender based on its category!

Certain categories of nouns have the same gender.

Masculine noun categories

- Languages e.g. *le français, l'anglais*
- Countries not ending in *e* e.g. *le Canada, le Maroc, le Portugal* Exceptions: Explained below

- Days, months, seasons e.g. *le lundi, le novembre, le printemps*
- Colours i.e. *le rouge, le bleu*
- English borrowed words e.g. *le parking, le week-end*



Note that the actual word for colour (*la couleur*) is feminine, however, the name for each colour is masculine i.e. *le rouge, le bleu*

Feminine noun categories

- Countries ending in *e* e.g. *la France, la Suisse* Exceptions: *le Mexique, le Cambodge, le Belize, le Zimbabwe, le Mozambique*
- Academic subjects e.g. *la chimie, la sociologie*
- Cars e.g. *la Peugeot, la Mercedes*

So that is noun genders guidelines! I hope it is helpful to give you some structure to your learning.

Next *Grammar Boost* will be on making nouns plural and other fun things...!