

PERFECT PHRASES in
French
for Confident Travel

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The No *Faux-Pas* Phrasebook
for the Perfect Trip

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Contents

Introduction	v	
Pronunciation Guide	vii	
Chapter 1	Good Manners	1
Chapter 2	Money Matters	13
Chapter 3	Hotels	17
Chapter 4	Public Transportation	23
Chapter 5	Driving	37
Chapter 6	Shopping	47
Chapter 7	Grooming	65
Chapter 8	Shopping for Food	69
Chapter 9	Eating Out	77
Chapter 10	Entertainment	87
Chapter 11	Museums to Mountains	93
Chapter 12	Common Warnings	105
Chapter 13	Emergencies	109

Contents

Chapter 14	Health Issues	113
Chapter 15	Making Plans	121
Chapter 16	Romance	129
Chapter 17	Keeping in Touch	137
Chapter 18	Sports	153
Chapter 19	Weather	159
Chapter 20	Conversational Phrases	165

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Introduction

I wrote this little book to help the American traveler with less than perfect mastery of the French language but who, nevertheless, is eager to interact in French while visiting France.

I found myself in exactly that situation many years ago when I first entered the United States. Having studied British English with great passion, but having had very little practice in oral communication, I was looking forward to honing in on those skills and finally practicing English in real-life situations. Surely among millions of friendly New Yorkers, there would be some who would enjoy speaking with me. Surprise: my host family was dumbfounded when they realized that my speaking skills did not by any stretch of the imagination match my writing skills.

A *Perfect Phrases in English* book would have been a treasure for me. Too late for me, but not for you!

In this book, I have included phrases to help you communicate with native French speakers throughout your trip, from basic courtesy-related phrases such as *Bonjour Monsieur*, which are so useful when setting the tone in any situation, to more situation-specific phrases designed to help you with essential needs such as asking for fresh towels in a hotel or ordering a drink at a café. The organization of phrases within the book is based on major themes such as Hotels, Money, Shopping, and Entertainment. The phrases are mostly those

Introduction

I deemed essential and practical for getting around as a tourist and include survival phrases such as *Où est... ?* (Where is . . . ?) or *Ça fait combien... ?* (How much is . . . ?) However, I did include some conversational phrases for those of you who would like to forge relationships with native French speakers. The index provides additional help in looking up the phrase you need.

Each chapter includes several main entries covering a specific situation or need, such as *Est-ce qu'il y a une station de métro près de l'hôtel?* (Is there a subway station near the hotel?) In addition to an English translation, each entry provides a phonetic representation of the French pronunciation, designed to help you feel confident speaking French. Most of the phonetic representations are self-explanatory, but note that the transcriptions **ih**, **ah**, **oh**, and **uh** stand for the French nasal sounds represented by the letter combinations *in* (*im*), *an* (*am*), *on* (*om*), and *un* (*um*). Also note that a capital **U** in the transcription stands for the last sound you hear in the English words *few* or *pew*, and that **ueh** stands for the vowel sound in an English word like *perk* or *murky*. Remember, however, that you don't have to pronounce perfectly to get your point across, and the French will appreciate your efforts to speak their language.

What I think you'll find unique and, I hope, enjoyable, is that each entry is accompanied by detailed explanations of the cultural context in which you might come across or use the phrases, enabling you to make the most of your encounters with French speakers during your trip. Each main entry is also followed by other phrases that reinforce or pertain to the main entry, which will greatly increase your ability to communicate.

I hope you will be able to use many of these phrases on your trip and wish you **bonne chance** and many happy memories!

Pronunciation Guide

In addition to an English translation, each entry provides a phonetic representation of the French pronunciation designed so that you will feel confident speaking French. Most of these phonetic representations are self-explanatory, but this guide will clarify elements of French pronunciation with which you might not be familiar.

Most consonants are pronounced similarly in French and English, although the French *r* is guttural (produced in the throat), not forward in the mouth as it is in English. Some other things to keep in mind about consonants in French:

- The letter *h* is always silent.
- Many consonants, for example, *s*, *t*, and *d*, are silent at the end of words, unless the following word begins with a vowel sound.
- The equivalent of the English *th* sound does not exist in French. Pronounce it simply as *t*.

However, the pronunciation of vowels and vowel-consonant combinations vary quite a bit from French to English. In order to use the phonetic representations in this book to their full advantage, follow these guides for vowel sounds. (The letters in bold below are what you will see in the phonetic representations.)

Pronunciation Guide

- **a** is pronounced like the *a* sound in the word *father*.
- **ee** stands for many *i* or *y* sounds in French spelling; it is pronounced like the sound *ee* as in *heel*.
- **o** is pronounced like the sound *o* in *more* or *bored*.
- The vowel *e* is always silent at the end of a French word unless the *e* has an accent mark (*é*).

Some letter combinations containing the vowels *e* and *u* have unique sounds in French that do not exist in English. To get as close as possible to their authentic pronunciation, practice as follows:

- **eu** represents the sound of *u* in *lurk* or the sound of *e* in *perk* or the sound of *i* in *girl*. In French this sound is usually spelled: *e*, *eu*, or *œu*.
- Capital **U** represents the *final sound* in the English words *few* or *pew*. In French, it is normally spelled: *u*.

The phonetic representations **ah**, **ih**, **uh**, and **oh** stand for French nasal sounds where, in spelling, the vowel combines with *-n* or *-m* to produce a unique blended sound. The letter **h** after a vowel in the transcription reminds you that this vowel makes a special sound as described below:

- **ah** represents a nasal sound similar to the vowel sound in the word *pawn* or *lawn*. Be careful *not* to sound out the letter *n* or *m*; this is a vowel, not a consonant sound.
- **ih** represents a nasal sound similar to the vowel sound in *glance* or *chance*.

Pronunciation Guide

- **uh** represents a nasal sound similar to the *u* sound in *muddy*.
- **oh** represents a nasal sound similar to the *o* sound in *bonfire* or *conjugate*. Remember: *Do not* sound out the letters *n* or *m*.

Remember as you use this book, however, that you don't have to pronounce perfectly to get your point across and that the French will appreciate your efforts to speak their language.

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Chapter 1

Good Manners



Bonjour. (*boh-zhoor*): Hello.

This is the basic everyday greeting used by anyone, young or old, in formal and informal settings. In a French-speaking country, it should always be followed by a title such as *monsieur*, *madame*, or *mademoiselle* when addressing adults who are not your friends. Be especially aware that French people who work in shops, stores, and other businesses expect customers to greet them as they enter their premises. Unlike American customers who are often very direct in stating what they want, French customers are expected to exhibit good manners and act politely toward the people who are there to assist them. This means saying *Bonjour*, *monsieur/madame/mademoiselle* before asking for service.

Never address the local baker or grocery clerk by his/her first name even if you see him/her regularly; first names are reserved for friends and relatives. In very formal settings such as government, corporate, or diplomatic circles, make the effort to learn appropriate titles such as *monsieur le directeur* (*meuh-syeuh leuh dee-rek-teuhr*), *madame la directrice* (*ma-dam la dee-rek-trees*), *monsieur le consul* (*meuh-syeuh*

leuh koh-sUI), or *madame le maire* (ma-dam leuh mer). This will be very much appreciated. If you know the last name of a person, you may use it and, for example, say *Bonjour, Monsieur/Madame Lafitte*. However this is not necessary; a simple *Bonjour, monsieur/madame* is quite acceptable.

Bonjour, monsieur.

Hello (to a man).

boh-zhoor meuh-syeuh

Bonjour, madame.

Hello (to a woman).

boh-zhoor ma-dam

Bonjour, mademoiselle.

Hello (to a young woman or a girl).

boh-zhoor mad-mwa-zel



Enchanté(e). (*ah-shah-tay*): Pleased to meet you.

This phrase, more frequently used by men than by women, is particularly delightful when used with appreciative people. Charm a lady by greeting her with this single lovely word which literally means “enchanted” or “charmed.” To further impress your new acquaintance, you may use the entire phrase *Enchanté(e) de faire votre connaissance*. This phrase is often used by gentlemen greeting ladies in conjunction with a *baise-main* (bez-mih), a light kiss on the hand. A little less flashy or bewitching, but nevertheless pleasing, is the phrase *Heureux/Heureuse de faire votre connaissance*.

**Enchanté(e) de faire votre
connaissance.**

Delighted to make your
acquaintance.

ah-shah-tay deuh fer vot

ko-nes-sahs

**Heureux/Heureuse de faire
votre connaissance.**

Happy to make your acquaintance.

euh-reuh/euh-reuhz deuh fer vot
ko-nes-sahs



Comment allez-vous? (*ko-mah ta-lay voo*): How are you?

This classic phrase frequently accompanies a greeting and can be safely used with any adult. The *Bonjour. Comment allez-vous?* question can be answered with *Bien, merci. Et vous?* (byeh mer-see ay voo) (Fine, thank you. And you?) or *Pas mal* (pa mal) (Not bad) or *Comme ci, comme ça* (kom see kom sa) (So-so).

In informal settings or with children and young people, you may use the phrase *Comment ça va?* Your respondent will answer with *Bien* (byeh) (Fine). You may also abbreviate your question to *Ça va?*, making sure to raise the pitch of your voice on the second syllable. This can be answered with *Oui, ça va bien* (wee sa va byeh) (Yes, it's going fine) or *Non, ça ne va pas très bien*. (noh sa neuh va pa tray byeh) (No, it's not going so well.)

Comment ça va?

How are you? How is everything?

ko-mah sa va

Ça va?

Are you doing OK?

sa va

Ça va bien, merci.

I am fine, thank you.

sa va byeh mer-see



Comment vous portez-vous? (*ko-mah voo por-tay voo*):

How are you doing?

If you want to go beyond the casual salutation and ask how the person is doing, perhaps after an illness, ask: *Comment vous portez-vous en ce moment?* (How are you doing/feeling now?)

Mieux, merci.

Better, thank you.

myeuh mer-see

Beaucoup mieux, merci.

Much better, thank you.

bo-koo myeuh mer-see

Je me remets.

I am getting better.

zheuh meuh reuh-may



Je m'appelle... (*zheuh ma-pel*): My name is ...

Introduce yourself socially by saying *Je m'appelle John*. This is different from filling in your last and first name under *Nom* and *Prénom* or your *Nom de jeune fille* (maiden name) on a questionnaire, a customs document, or any other official paper.

Mon nom de famille est Smith.

My family name is Smith.

moh noh deuh fa-mee ay smith



Je vous présente... (*zheuh voo pray-zaht*): This is ...

Introduce your husband or wife by saying *Je vous présente mon mari/ma femme* (*zheuh voo pray-zaht moh ma-ree/ma fam*). Introduce your friend or significant other by saying: *Je vous présente mon ami*

Marc/mon amie Martine. The French are generally more discreet—and they can also be more matter-of-fact—about relationships than are Americans. You may not find out until much later whether the word *ami* (male friend) or *amie* (female friend) was meant in the casual sense of “friend” or whether the person was a boyfriend or girlfriend. So be patient and listen for clues in the conversation! You may also introduce someone in a more casual way by saying: *Voici...* (This is . . .).

Je vous présente mon ami(e). Let me introduce my friend.
zheuh voo pray-zaht mo na-mee

Voici mon mari. This is my husband.
vwa-see moh ma-ree

Voici ma femme. This is my wife.
vwa-see ma fam



Au revoir. (*o rvwar*): Good-bye.

This phrase is an appropriate way to say “good-bye” in any context, both in formal situations, as in *Au revoir, monsieur* (Good-bye, Sir) and informal situations, as in *Au revoir, Martine* (Good-bye, Martine). After six P.M. one says *Bonsoir* (literally, Good evening) instead of *Bonjour* (literally, Good day). However, while *Bonjour* is only used to say “Hello,” *Bonsoir* is used for both “Hello” and “Good-bye.”

Bonsoir. Hello./Good-bye. (in the evening)
boh-swar



Salut! (*sa-lU*): Hi!/Bye!

Used in informal situations between good friends, relatives, and especially among young people, *Salut!* is the equivalent of “Hi!” as well as “Bye!” When it is used to say “Bye,” it is often followed by a phrase such as *À bientôt* (See you soon), *À demain* (See you tomorrow), or *À samedi* (See you Saturday).

À bientôt. See you soon.

a byeh-to

À demain. See you tomorrow.

a deuh-mih

À samedi. See you Saturday.

a sam-dee



S'il vous plaît. (*seel voo play*): Please.

S'il vous plaît is an amazingly versatile expression. *Un café, s'il vous plaît* is simply “I’d like a cup of coffee, please.” But the phrase is used much more often than “please” in English. For example, you may use it to get your waiter’s attention: *Monsieur, s'il vous plaît!* is the equivalent of saying “We need service here.” In much the same way, it can be used instead of *Excusez-moi* (eks-kU-say mwa) to approach a person when you wish to ask for directions: *S'il vous plaît, Madame. Où se trouve la Tour Eiffel?* (*seel voo play ma-dam oo seuh troov la toor ay-fel*) (Excuse me, madam. Where is the Eiffel Tower?)

It is much better, however, to preface any kind of request for service or help with *Excusez-moi de vous déranger*. (eks-kU-say mwa deuh voo day-rah-zhay) (Forgive me for disturbing you.) At first, this may

seem burdensome and excessive to an American, but it is absolutely the right thing to do to show your good manners to a French person, especially someone who may be rushed or preoccupied. By using this sentence, you acknowledge that you are intruding on someone's privacy.

In addition, *s'il vous plaît* can be used derisively or sarcastically. Consider the sentence: *Et elle descend toujours au Ritz, s'il vous plaît!* (And she always stays at the Ritz, if you please/no less!)

Un café, s'il vous plaît.

A coffee, please.

uh ka-fay seel voo play

S'il vous plaît, Madame/

Excuse me/Please, Madam/Sir/Miss.

Monsieur/Mademoiselle.

seel voo play ma-dam/

meuh-syeuh/mad-mwa-zel

Entrez, s'il vous plaît.

Please enter!

ah-tray seel voo play

Par ici, s'il vous plaît.

This way, please.

par ee-see seel voo play



Merci. (*mer-see*): Thank you.

Bien, merci (Fine, thank you) is the perfect way to answer the question *Comment ça va?* Want to show a little more enthusiasm? Add: *Super! Merci mille fois!* (Super! A thousand thanks!) The basic thank you can be enhanced in a variety of ways: *Un grand merci* (uh grah mer-see) (A big thank you); *Merci beaucoup* (Thanks a lot); *Merci mille fois* (A thousand thanks), *Merci infiniment* (I am infinitely grateful).

Just like American children, French children are continually being reminded to say *Merci*, often in a typical reproachful way such as *Tu*

Perfect Phrases in French for Confident Travel

ne dis pas merci? (tU neuh dee pa mer-see) (Don't you/we say thank you?) In contrast to American children, however, French children must also remember to add the appropriate title *monsieur/madame/mademoiselle* to their *merci* or they will embarrass their parents and be called *mal élevés* (mal ayl-vay), literally, "badly raised." To acknowledge someone's thanks, answer *De rien, Je vous en prie*, or *Il n'y a pas de quoi*. These phrases all mean "You're welcome./Don't mention it."

Bien, merci.

Fine, thank you.

byeh mer-see

Super! Merci mille fois!

Great! A thousand thanks!

sU-per mer-see meel fwa

Merci, Madame/Monsieur/

Mademoiselle.

Thank you, Madam/Sir/Miss.

mer-see ma-dam/meuh-syeuh/
mad-mwa-zel

Merci beaucoup.

Thanks a lot.

mer-see bo-koo

Merci mille fois.

A thousand thanks.

mer-see meel fwa

Merci infiniment.

I am infinitely grateful.

mer-see ih-fee-nee-mah

De rien.

You're welcome.

deuh ryeh

Je vous en prie.

You're welcome.

zheuh voo zah pree

Il n'y a pas de quoi.

Don't mention it.

eel nya pad kwa



Être à la merci de... (*etr a la mer-see deuh*): To be at someone's mercy.

The phrase *Je suis à votre merci* (zheuh swee a vot mer-see) (I am at your mercy), can be said by a person who totally depends on another. If you want a really good place in a theater, you might want to appeal to the goodwill of the ticket booth clerk or other agent by saying: *J'aurais désiré une place au balcon, mais je suis à votre merci.* (zho-ray day-see-ray Un plas o bal-koh may zheuh swee a vot mer-see) (I would have liked a balcony seat, but I am at your mercy.)



Excusez-moi. (*eks-kU-zay mwa*): I'm sorry./Excuse me.

Excusez-moi is another versatile phrase that can be used in many different contexts. Use it to say "I'm sorry" or "I apologize," for example, if you've accidentally bumped into someone. *Excusez-moi*, like *Pardon*, is an effective and polite way to begin your request. You may preface a request for directions by saying: *Pardon, Monsieur/Madame. Excusez-moi de vous déranger.* (Pardon me, Sir/Madam. Sorry to bother you.)

Having garnered the person's attention, you can then safely ask for directions: *Pourriez-vous m'indiquer la rue de la Madeleine?* (poo-ryay voo mih-dee-kay la rU deuh la ma-dlen) (Can you tell me where Madeleine Street is?)

Sometimes *Excusez-moi* is used to warn another person what you are about to do or say. You might use this phrase as you are about to squeeze through a crowded subway to reach the exit: *Excusez-moi. C'est mon arrêt!* (*eks-kU-zay mwa say mo na-ray*) (Excuse me. This is my stop!), or you might use the phrase as a lead-in to expressing your disagreement with someone: *Excusez-moi. J'ai quelque chose à vous*

dire. (eks-kU-zay mwa zhay kel-keuh shoz a voo deer) (Excuse me. I have something to tell you.)

Excusez-moi, Madame/ Monsieur/Mademoiselle. Excuse me, Madam/Sir/Miss.

eks-kU-zay mwa ma-dam/
meuh-syeh/mad-mwa-zel

Excusez-moi de vous déranger. I'm sorry to bother you.

eks-kU-zay mwa deuh voo
day-rah-zhay

Excusez-moi de vous interrompre. Forgive me for interrupting.

eks-kU-zay mwa deuh voo
ih-tay-roh-pr



Pardonnez-moi. (*par-don-nay mwa*): Pardon me.

Pardonnez-moi can be ambiguous. It is somewhat stronger than *Excusez-moi* as it implies begging forgiveness. You may use *Pardonnez-moi* or *Pardon* followed by the appropriate title *Monsieur/Madame/Mademoiselle* when you need a salesperson's or a waiter's attention or when you are about to ask someone to help you in any way: *Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur. Où sont les toilettes, s'il vous plaît?* (Pardon me, Sir. Where is the restroom, please?)

The French are well known for their tendency to disagree and play devil's advocate with one another. When they are about to disagree with someone, they will do it politely, but with a nuance of sarcasm, by saying something like: *Pardonnez-moi, mais je ne suis pas d'accord.* (Pardon me, but I do not agree.) In addition, the French tend to be cynical and direct about life's realities; don't be surprised to hear negative phrases such as: *Ça ne pardonne pas*, which is frequently