*[pronunciationguide.info](http://www.pronunciationguide.info/index.html)*

**French and Provençal**

French takes a while to get the hang of, but there are two things in our favor:

1. Most people already have a good general idea of what it's supposed to sound like.
2. Many of the most peculiar features of French pronunciation were inherited by English, and are thus somewhat familiar to us.

The most difficult challenges are getting the vowels right, and knowing when *not* to pronounce certain letters.

French Alphabet has the same number of letters as English 26, but some of them have “accents” and “cedilla”, that doesn’t make their pronunciation different, only to distinguish them from other similar looking words except the cedilla **ç,**which is pronounced as “S” and never as “k”. The table below shows how the French letters are pronounced.

|  |
| --- |
| **French Alphabet** |
| **Aa as in the word “ask” like ‘ah’ and never as in the word “able”** |
| **Bb same as in English** |
| **Cc like “s” before "i" or "e" and when it has the cedilla “ç”; otherwise like "k” in Creole.** |
| **Dd same as in English (many words in French alphabet are the same)** |
| **Ee as in “elevated”** |
| **Ff same as in English** |
| **Gg like the "s" in the word “pleasure” before "e" or "i"; otherwise like the "g" in "God", never pronounced as “dj”.** |
| **Hh silent most of the time.** |
| **Ii as in the word “ink” never as in the word “island”** |
| **Jj as in Job, but without the “d” pronounced before the J, never as {djob} but {job}** |
| **Kk same as in English** |
| **Ll same as in English** |
| **Mm same as in English** |
| **Nn same as in English** |
| **Oo same as in English “Old” never as in “Hot” which is pronounced somehow like {hat}** |
| **Pp same as in English** |
| **Qq same as in English** |
| **Rr same as in English but slightly like as in “ghr” as in Merci** |
| **Ss same as in English** |
| **Tt same as in English not as sharp.** |
| **Uu as in the “ultra”, never as in the word “up” or “university”** |
| **Vv same as in English** |
| **Ww as in English although rare (mainly found in borrowed words)** |
| **Xx same as in English** |
| **Yy same as in English although rare.** |
| **Zz same as in English** |

***Diacritics***

French uses three kinds of accent marks on vowels: acute (é), grave (è) and circumflex (ê), but unlike in Spanish or Italian, they do not indicate stress. They can however alter the sound of a vowel: *é* is pronounced differently from *è* (see below). There's also the cedilla (ç), which softens the letter *c* (i.e. changes the sound from **k** to **s**).

***Vowels and Diphthongs (non-nasalized)***

A fundamental property of French vowels is that their sounds often depend very much on what consonants happen to be nearby. The proximity of *m* or *n* creates a very special situation which is discussed in the next section; we describe the other cases first.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| a | **ah** |
| ai, ay | **ay**, like English |
| ail | **iy**, like the word "eye" |
| ais, ait (final) | **eh** |
| au | **o**, approximately |
| e (usually) | **uh**, somewhere between the **e** in English "per" and the **oo** in English "book"; almost a schwa |
| e (final) | **silent**, except when it follows *r* or *l* or *n* (which in turn must follow something other than *r* or *l* or *n*): then *e* is pronounced as **uh** but is very short, and the previous syllable is stressed, e.g. *quatre* = **kah-truh** [audio sample] |
| é | **ay** |
| è, ê | **eh** |
| eau | **o**, approximately |
| er, et, ez, eil (final) | **ay** (exception: *La Mer* = **lah mehr**) |
| eu | **ö**, similar to German: like **ay** but with lips rounded to produce an **oh**-like sound, e.g. *Jeux* = **zhö** [audio sample] |
| i, ie | **ee** |
| il, ille (final) | **ee** |
| o | **oh** (a bit shorter) |
| oeu | **ö**, basically the same as *eu* |
| oi | **wah**, e.g. *L'Oiseau Lyre* = **lwah-zoh leer** [audio sample] |
| ou | **oo** as in "root" |
| oui | **wee** |
| u | **ü**, similar to German: like **ee** but with lips rounded to produce an **oo**-like sound, e.g. *Henri Dutilleux* = **an-ree dü-tee-yö** [audio sample] |
| ue (final) | **silent**, as in English "vague" |
| ui | **wee** |
| y | **ee** |

***Nasalized Vowels***

Certain vowels change slightly when followed by any undoubled *n* or *m* that is not followed by a vowel; in these cases also the *m* or *n* is not fully articulated (unless another consonant follows). The table below lists the most important examples for radio purposes.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| an, am | **on**, **om**, e.g. *Nadia Boulanger* = **nah-dee-a boo-lon-zhay** [audio sample], *Estampes* = **es-tomp** |
| aen | **en**, e.g. *Olivier Messiaen* = **oh-lee-vee-yay mess-see-en** [audio sample] |
| en, em | **ahn**, **ahm**, e.g. *Charpentier* = **shar-pahn-tyay** [audio sample], *Vincent D'Indy* = **van-sahn dan-dee** [audio sample] |
| ean | **ahn**, e.g. *Jean-Yves Thibaudet* = **zhahn-eev tee-boh-day** [audio sample] |
| in, im | **an**, **am**, e.g. *François Couperin* = **fron-swah koo-per-an** [audio sample] |
| un, um | **uhn**, **uhm**, e.g. *D'un Soir Triste* = **dun swahr treest** [audio sample] |

***Consonants***

These are generally silent at ends of words, except for four particular consonants: *c*, *r*, *f* and *l* (the consonants in the word "careful"); one exception to this is the final *-er*, which is pronounced **ay**, as noted above. Consonants followed by a silent *e* are pronounced.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| c [+a,o,u] | **k** |
| c [+i,e] | **s** |
| ce [+vowel] | **s**, e.g. *Morceau* = **mor-soh** |
| ç | **s** |
| ch | **sh** |
| g [+a,o,u] | **g**, hard, as in "go" |
| g [+i,e] | **zh**, like the *s* in "measure" |
| ge [+vowel] | **zh**, e.g. *Georges* = **zhorzh** |
| gn | **ny**, like Italian *gn* or Spanish *ñ* |
| gu [+i,e,y] | **g**, hard, e.g. *Guillaume* = **gee-yohm** |
| h | **silent**, e.g. *Le Havre* = **luh ahv-ruh** |
| j | **zh**, like the *s* in "measure" |
| lh | **y**, e.g. *Milhaud* = **mee-yoh** |
| ll | **l** by default (e.g. *village* = **vee-lahzh**, *allez* = **ah-lay**), but if the letters *ill* appear between two more vowels, the *ll*means **y** (e.g. *Guillaume* = **gee-yohm**) |
| qu | **k**, almost always, but occasionally **kw**, e.g. *quatuor* = **kwah-tü-or** |
| r | **r**: uvular (light gutteral) trill, usually silent after e at ends of words |
| s (between vowels) | **z**, e.g. *désir* = **day-zeer** |
| s (otherwise) | **s** |
| ss | **s** |
| tch | **ch**, as in "church" |
| th | **t**, e.g. *Jean-Yves Thibaudet* = **zhahn-eev tee-boh-day** [audio sample] |
| ti [+vowel] | **sy**, e.g. *nation* = **nah-syon** |
| x (non-final) | **z** |
| x (final) | **silent**, or **ks** (when following *i*, e.g. *Astérix* = **ah-steh-reeks**), or *s* (e.g. *dix* = **dees**, the number "ten") |
| z | **z** |

***Stress***

Almost always on the last syllable (there are always [exceptions](http://www.pronunciationguide.info/French.html#exceptions)). *Stress is absolutely unaffected by accent marks!*

Those who speak French may tell you that this rule is an oversimplification, that in reality, there is no stress in French. This means simply that when French is spoken properly, the syllables in any sentence or phrase run together in a continuous unaccented stream until they reach the end, and the final syllable of the stream sounds stressed because it is followed by a pause. In practice, this way of looking at it usually leads to the same result; in any case one should try to produce a smooth flow of syllables when pronouncing French, and not to overaccentuate any words in the middle of a phrase.

***Linking***

Final consonants that would otherwise be silent are pronounced, if the next word is related and begins with a vowel or mute *h*. Such sequences should be pronounced as a single word (e.g. *beaux* = **boh**, but *Beaux Arts Trio* =**bohz-ar** "trio" ![[audio sample]]() (or **bohz-art**), *bon* = **bon**, but *bon ami* = **bo-nah-mee**).

***Elision***

Contractions are signified by apostrophes, as in English. If you see an apostrophe, pretend it isn't there and pronounce every letter you see accordingly, e.g. *D'un Soir Triste* = **dun swahr treest** ![[audio sample]]().

***Notable Exceptions***

The following important names break one or more of the rules stated above, so you'll just have to memorize them:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Auber | **oh-behr** [audio sample] |
| Berlioz | **behr-lee-ohz** [audio sample] |
| Pierre Boulez | **pyehr boo-lehz** [audio sample] |
| Guillaume Dufay | **gee-yohm dü-fiy** (**iy** sounds like "eye") [audio sample] |
| Darius Milhaud | **dah-ree-üs mee-yoh** [audio sample] |
| Francis Poulenc | **fron-sees poo-lenk** [audio sample] |

**Medieval French**

Some modifications should be made when pronouncing titles of early French music. We can't possibly get them all exactly right, but there are a few general principles to follow. Note that what we're calling "Medieval French" here should not be confused with medieval Provençal, which was a distinct dialect spoken in southern France until about the 13th century (see below).

It must be pointed out that not all recordings of Medieval French music will seem to agree in matters of pronunciation -- this is to be expected since there are no longer any Medieval Frenchmen to consult on the matter. The following indications should at least bear some resemblance to any recording you might hear.

***Vowels***

During most of the middle ages, *n* and *m* were fully pronounced at ends of words, and *i* and *u* retained their normal sounds when preceding them: thus early French *fin* = **feen** and *un* = **ün**.

***Consonants***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| h | **h**: pronounced (not silent like today) until the 17th century |
| r, rr | **r**: trilled as in Spanish or Italian until 17th century |
| r (final) | **silent**, always |
| s [+f,k,l,m,p,t] | **silent**, e.g. *espouser* = **ay-poo-zay** (most such words no longer include *s* in the modern spelling) |

**Provençal**

Provençal is the customary name given to a variant of French that was spoken widely in southern France from about 1100 to 1300: it is the language of most troubadour poetry. If you encounter troubadour songs with oddly spelled titles that would be awkward to pronounce by the usual French rules, it is probably Provençal, and should be pronounced accordingly. In such cases you are fortunate, because Provençal is simpler to pronounce than French; in many ways it's much more like Spanish.

The note above about variations in Medieval French pronunciation applies just as well to Provençal: different recordings sometimes do things differently.

***Vowels***

The rules of Spanish or Italian provide a good approximation. There is no nasalization, so *e* and *i* are always what they appear to be. Note: the following two diphthongs should be pronounced as in Spanish or Italian, not French:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| au | **ow** |
| eu | **eh-oo**, condensed to one syllable (somewhat like the British **oh** in "phone") |

***Consonants***

Mostly like French, with the following exceptions. Except for the letter *h*, which is silent as in modern French, all consonants are pronounced, even at ends of words.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ch | **ch**, as in "church" |
| g (final) | **sh**, e.g. *fag* = **fahsh** |
| g [+i,e], j | **j** (like English, NOT **zh**) |
| z (final) | **ts**, e.g. *amanz* = **ah-mants** |