THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO
FRENCH

EVERYDAY VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR TO HELP YOU
SURVIVE IN FRENCH (AND THEN SOME!)

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CHAPTER ONE

ACCENTS

ACCENTS

Accents are essential to correctly using the French language, but for those of us who aren't familiar to writing with accents, they can be very tricky indeed. The pronunciation and meaning of a word can change with or without an accent. Sometimes, accents aren't included when the French type online…but that's another story. In regular writing, it's important to use accents correctly.

The French language uses five different kinds of accents. They are as follows:

- *l'accent aigu*: the acute accent, literally the "high" accent. This accent is only used with é

- *l'accent grave*: the grave accent, literally the "low" accent. The grave accent can be used with the following three letters: à, è, ù

- *l'accent circonflexe:* the circumflex. This accent can be used with the following letters: â, ê, î, ô, û

- *le tréma:* the umlaut. This accent can be used with the following letters: ë, ï, ü

- *la cédille*: the cedilla. This accent is only used with:ç

Having trouble typing French letters? Check out our handy guide!

ACCENTS

The *accent aigu* is the most common accent used in French because it is used for the past tense form of many verbs. This makes the "e" sound higher–think of your voice following the accent up from the left to the right–é. For example the past participle of the verb *donner (*to give) is *donné.* The *accent aigu* on the last letter here makes it sound just like the infinitive verb form (don-ay).

With the letter "e," the *accent grave* is the opposite of the *accent aigu*. Picture your voice going lower by following the accent from left to right–è. It is used for the pronunciation of the letter "e," but with the letters "a" and "u" the pronunciation does not change and it is only used to distinguish one word from another. For example, *ou* means "or" but *où* means "where." These two words are pronounced exactly the same.

La cédille is used to make a hard "c" sound softer. In fact, the ç sounds exactly like the English "s." For example, *façade* is pronounced with a soft c or s sound.

The *trema* is used only when two vowels are next to each other and both need to be pronounced. Think of the two dots of the trema as both vowels next to one another. Thus, *mäis* is pronounced mah-ez.

The *circumflex* normally indicates that there was once an "s" or an s sound in Latin or old French. For example: "fête" was once spelled "feste." This doesn't mean that you pronounce an s sound, however. The circumflex only affects the pronunciation of the letters "a," "e," and "o"–not "i" or "u". This change in pronunciation is very slight however, as the circumflex is a combination of the accent grave and the accent aigu. It's also known as "le petit chapeau" in French!

Want to hear these accent marks in action?
Check out this helpful pronunciation video!

SUBJECT PRONOUNS

SUBJECT PRONOUNS

In French, you must learn the subject pronouns before you can begin forming sentences, as verb forms change depending on the subject.

Singular		Plural	
Je	I	Nous	We
Tu	You	Vous	You
Il	He/It (m)	Ils	They (m)
Elle	She/It (f)	Elles	They (f)
On	One		

The first personal singular pronouns "je" contracts to "j'" when used in front of a vowel or a silent h. For example:

J'aime courir. (I like to run.)
J'habite en France. (I live in France).

"Tu" and "vous" both express "you," but have difference uses.
- "Tu" is the familiar "you" and should be used when speaking to one person who is a friend, peer, or child.
- "Vous" is the formal "you" and should be used when speaking to someone you don't know well, someone older than you, or someone to whom you want to show respect.
- "Vous" is also the plural "you" and should be used when talking to multiple people, no matter who they are.

SUBJECT PRONOUNS

"Il" and "elle" represent "he" and "she" respectively when talking about people, but can both be used as "it" when referring to other nouns. All French nouns have gender (to be discussed in a coming chapter!), so "il" is used when replacing masculine nouns, and "elle" is used when replacing feminine nouns. For example:

Il mange trois fois par jour. (He eats three times a day.)
Elle chante comme un ange. (She sings like an angel.)

Je ne peux pas monter mon vélo parce qu'il est cassé. (I can't ride my bike because it is broken.
Note that "mon vélo" is masculine, so we use "il".
J'aime *la voiture* parce qu'elle est bleu. (I like the car because it is blue.)
Note that "la voiture" is feminine, so we use "elle".

"On" literally means "one" but is used to form the passive voice. It is also used as colloquially for "we" or for people in general. For example:

On pourrait dire ça. (One could say that.)
On va aller à la plage, (We are going to the beach.)

Listen to this funny little song to hear the pronunciation of the subject pronouns.

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

DEFINITE ARTICLES

In English, we use the definite article "the" when referring to a specific noun or nouns, such as "the car" or "the puppies." In French, the definite articles changes depending on the gender and quantity of the noun.

Definite Articles	
le	masculine singular noun
la	feminine singular noun
l'	any singular noun used before a vowel or silent "h"
les	plural noun

The definite article is used in French in the following situations:

1. When the **noun** designates a person, place, or thing that is **well-known or unique**:

    Le soleil (the sun); *la terre* (the Earth); *la tour Eiffel* (the Eiffel Tower)

2. When the **noun refers to something in general**:

    l'argent (money); *le bonheur* (happiness); *la musique* (music); *les chiens* (dogs)

3. When the noun is understood to be **known due to a relative subordinate clause, a possessive phrase or the context**:

    La voiture que je voulais acheter a été vendue. The car I wanted to buy has been sold. (relative subordinate clause)

    Le chat de ma sœur s'est échappé. My sister's cat ran away. (possessive phrase)

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

You also use a definite article before:

- **Place names** (*l'Europe, l'Ouest, la mer Méditerranée, le Nil, les Alpes, etc.*) *There are some exceptions. You don't put an article before *Cuba, Israël, Madagascar, Chypre* and a few other countries.
- **Peoples and languages** (*les Italiens, l'italien, la Chine, le chinois, etc.*)
- **Seasons, the date and holidays** (*l'hiver, le 14 juillet, la fête nationale française*) *Be careful: don't use an article with *Noël* or *Pâques* or before months and if you use one before a day of the week like *"le lundi"*, for example, it would mean every Monday)
- **Titles** (*le Président, le Premier ministre, le professeur Dupont, etc.*)
- **Superlatives** (*le plus beau, la plus belle, etc.*)

Of course, you're probably wondering how you'll know *when* to use a masculine article vs. a feminine article. For the most part, you'll need to memorize the gender of each noun. Fear not, though, there are some helpful clues that allow you to guess the gender of a noun if you're not already familiar.

On the following page, we'll share a list of endings that typically reflect gender (including the percentage of accuracy).

This grammar video provides a simple overview of masculine vs. feminine definite articles.

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

FEMININE NOUN ENDINGS

-aie (as in *haie*) — 100%

-oue (as in *boue*) — 100%

-eue (as in *banlieue*) — 100%

-ue (as in *rue*) — 100%

-arbe, -ombe, -ourbe (as in *barbe)* — 100%

-ion (as in *station*) — 98%

-ie (as in *scie*) — 98%

-euse, -ouse, -ase, -aise, -ese, -oise, -ise, -yse, -ose, -ause, -use (as in *perseuse)* — 97%

-té, -ié, -ée (as in *dictée*) — 95%

-ette, -ete, `-atte, -aite, -otte, -utte, -aute, -eute, -oite, -oute, -arte, -erte, -orte, -ante, -ente, -inte, -onte (as in *dette*) — 95%

-ande, -ende, -onde, -ade, -ude, -aude, -arde, -orde, -ourde (as in *viande*) — 95%

-asse, -ace, -esse, -ece, -aisse, -isse/-ice, -uce, -ousse, -ance, -anse, -ence, -ince, -once, -ource/-ourse (as in *classe*) — 93%

MASCULINE NOUN ENDINGS

-ai, -ais, -ait, -es, -et (as in *délai*) — 100%

-it, -est (as in *granit)* – 100%

-ail, -eil, -euil, -ueil (as in *deuil*) — 100%

-an, -and, -ant, -ent (as in *volcan*) — 99%

-at, -as, -ois, -oit (as in *bois)* — 99%

-as, -is, -os, -us, -ex (as in *atlas)* — 99%

-al, -el, -il, -ol, -eul, -all (as in *festival)* — 99%

-in, -int, -om, -ond, -ont, -on (as in *pont*) — 99% (but not after *sc)*

-ou, -out, -out, -oux (as in *bijoux*) — 98%

-i, -il, -it, -is, -y (as in *defi)* — 97%

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

INDEFINITE ARTICLES

In English, we use the indefinite article "a", "an", "one" or "some" to refer to an unspecified object, like "an apple" or "some cookies." In French, the indefinite articles are:

Indefinite Articles	
un	masculine singular noun
une	feminine singular noun
des	plural noun
de	negative construction

The definite article is used in French in the following situations:

1. When referring to an **unspecified object**(s):
   une maison (a house); *des chats* (some cats)
2. When talking about **one or more objects**, but not an entire category of objects:
   Il y a **un oiseau** dans l'arbre. (There is **a bird** in the tree.)
   Les oiseaux ont des plumes. (Birds have feathers.) → This sentence uses an indefinite article because it refers to all birds in general.
3. When **expressions of quantity**, including:
   une douzaine de (a dozen of)   un peu de (a little of)
   une tasse de (a cup of)   une tranche de (a slice of)
   un verre de (a glass of)   un morceau de (a piece of)

When negating, the indefinite article becomes "de" or *not any*.
   Example: Elle a **un** chien. → Ella n'a pas **de** chiens. (She does **not** have **any** dogs.)

VERB CONJUGATION

VERB CONJUGATION

French verb conjugation may seem overwhelming at first, but once you learn the different types of verbs, it becomes much simpler.

ER VERBS

The first group of verbs, known as –er verbs, includes verbs that end in –er, such as aim**er**, mang**er**, parl**er**, and beyond. To conjugate –er verbs, drop the –er from the end of the verb (this forms the "root") and append the correct conjugation suffix. The suffix changes depending on the subject performing the verb, so it's important to memorizing these endings.

Suffixes for –er verbs are as follows:

Singular		Plural	
Je	-e	Nous	-ons
Tu	-es	Vous	-ez
Il/Elle/On	-e	Ils/Elles	-ent

Example: Example:

Aimer   **Manger**
J'aim**e**   Nous aim**ons**   Je mang**e**   Nous mang**eons***
Tu aim**es**   Vous aim**ez**   Tu mang**es**   Vous mang**ez**
Il aim**e**   Ils aim**ent**   On mang**e**   Elles mang**ent**

*Note: When conjugating –er verbs that end –cer or –ger, like "manger" above, slight changes in spelling are required in the nous form to maintain the soft consonant sound.

–ger verbs add an "e" before the "ones" ending, like nous mangeons.

–cer verbs change the "c" to a "ç", such as "nous commençons"

VERB CONJUGATION

IR VERBS

The second group of verbs, known as –ir verbs, includes verbs that end in –ir, such as choisir, mentir, finir, and beyond. To conjugate –ir verbs, drop the –ir from the end of the verb (this forms the "root") and append the correct conjugation suffix.

Suffixes for –ir verbs are as follows:

Singular		Plural	
Je	-is	Nous	-issons
Tu	-is	Vous	-issez
Il/Elle/On	-it	Ils/Elles	-issent

Example: Example:

Choisir   **Finir**
Je choisis   Nous choisissons   Je finis   Nous finissons
Tu choisis   Vous choisissez   Tu finis   Vous finissez
Il choisit   Ils choisissent   Il finit   Ils finissent

Beware that there are a number of –ir verbs that are considered irregular verbs because they do not follow this conjugation pattern. Examples include offrir, ouvrir, and couvrir. There is no trick to determining which verbs are irregular, so you'll have to memorize them. We'll cover this in a later chapter.

VERB CONJUGATION

RE VERBS

The third group of verbs, known as –re verbs, includes verbs that end in –re, such as entrendre, attendre, vendre and beyond. To conjugate –re verbs, drop the –re from the end of the verb (this forms the "root") and append the correct conjugation suffix.

Suffixes for –re verbs are as follows:

Singular		Plural	
Je	-s	Nous	-ons
Tu	-s	Vous	-ez
Il/Elle/On	-	Ils/Elles	-ent

Example: Example:

Vendre   **Attendre**
Je vends   Nous vendons   J'attends   Nous attendons
Tu vends   Vous vendez   Tu attends   Vous attendez
Il vend   Ils vendent   Il attend   Ils attendent

Beware that there are a number of –re verbs that are considered irregular verbs because they do not follow this conjugation pattern. Examples include counduire, croire, faire, lire, and vivre. There is no trick to determining which verbs are irregular, so you'll have to memorize them. We'll cover this in a later chapter.

IRREGULAR VERBS: AVOIR & ÊTRE

AVOIR AND ÊTRE

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are exceptions to the conjugation rules in French. All three verb groups have irregular verbs and you must simply memorize their conjugations.

Two of the most important irregular verbs are avoir (to have) and être (to be). These verbs are commonly used on their own, in colloquial expressions and idioms, and as auxiliary verbs for conjugating in different tenses and moods of other verbs.

ÊTRE

The conjugation of être is as follows:

Singular		Plural	
Je	suis	Nous	sommes
Tu	es	Vous	êtes
Il/Elle/On	est	Ils/Elles	sont

Examples:

Je suis blond. (I am blonde.)
Tu es gentille. (You are nice.)
Il est en retard. (He is late.)
Nous sommes petits. (We are short.)
Vous êtes mes meilleurs amis. (You are my best friends.)
Elles sont drôles. (They are funny.)

AVOIR AND ÊTRE

AVOIR

The conjugation of avoir is as follows:

Singular		Plural	
J'	ai	Nous	avons
Tu	as	Vous	avez
Il/Elle/On	a	Ils/Elles	ont

Examples:

J'ai un frère. (I have one brother.)
Tu as un chien. (You have a dog.)
Il a deux voitures. (He has two cars.)
Nous avons beaucoup de travail . (We have a lot of work.)
Vous avez un joli sourire. (You have a pretty smile .)
Elles ont la même nom. (They have the same name.)

Note that avoir is used in many idioms and colloquial expressions, including:

avoir chaud	to be hot	**avoir honte de**	to be ashamed of
avoir froid	to be cold	**avoir raison**	to be right
avoir faim	to be hungry	**avoir tort**	to be wrong
avoir soif	to be thirsty	**avoir envie de**	to feel like
avoir sommeil	to be sleepy	**avoir besoin de**	to need
avoir mal à	to have an ache	**avoir lieu**	to take place
avoir l'air	to seem	**avoir de la chance**	to be lucky
avoir ____ ans	to be __years old	**avoir l'occasion de**	to have the opportunity
avoir peur de	to be afraid of		

NUMBERS 1–100

NUMBERS 1–20

0	*zéro*	[zay-ro]
1	*un*	[uh]
2	*deux*	[duhr]
3	trois	[twa]
4	quatre	[katr]
5	cinq	[sank]
6	six	[sees]
7	sept	[set]
8	huit	[weet]
9	neuf	[nurf]
10	dix	[dees]
11	onze	[onz]
12	douze	[dooz]
13	treize	[trez]
14	quatorze	[katorz]
15	quinze	[kanz]
16	seize	[sez]
17	dix-sept	[dee-set]
18	dix-huit	[dees-weet]
19	dix-neuf	[dees-nurf]
20	vingt	[van]

Practice pronouncing these numbers with our video on French Numbers 1-20.

NUMBERS 21–60

21	*vingt et un*	[vant-ay-uh]	41	quarante et un	[karont-ay-uh]
22	*vingt-deux*	[van-duhr]	42	quarante-deux	[karont-deux]
23	*vingt-trois*	[van-twa]	43	quarante-trois	[karont-twa]
24	*vingt-quatre*	[van-katr]	44	quarante-quatre	[karont-katr]
25	*vingt-cinq*	[van-sank]	45	quarante-cinq	[karont-sank]
26	*vingt-six*	[van-sees]	46	quarante-six	[karont-sees]
27	*vingt-sept*	[van-set]	47	quarante-sept	[karont-set]
28	*vingt-huit*	[van-weet]	48	quarante-huit	[karont-weet]
29	*vingt-neuf*	[van-nurf]	49	quarante-neuf	[karont-nurf]
30	trente	[tront]	50	cinquante	[sank-ont]
31	Trente et un	[tront ay-uh]	51	cinquante et un	[sank-ont-ay-uh]
32	Trente-deux	[tront-durh)	52	cinquante-deux	[sank-ont-deux]
33	Trente-trois	[tront-twa)	53	cinquante-trois	[sank-ont-twa]
34	Trente-quatre	[tront-katr)	54	cinquante-quatre	[sank-ont-katr]
35	Trente-cinq	[tront-sank)	55	cinquante-cinq	[sank-ont-sank]
36	Trente-six	[tront-sees)	56	cinquante-six	[sank-ont-sees]
37	Trente-sept	[tront-set)	57	cinquante-sept	[sank-ont-set]
38	Trente-huit	[tront-weet)	58	cinquante-huit	[sank-ont-weet]
39	Trente-neuf	[tront-nurf)	59	cinquante-neuf	[sank-ont-nurf]
40	quarante	[karont]	60	soixante	[swa-sont]

NUMBERS 61–100

61	soixante et un	[swa-sont-ay-un]	81	quatre-vingt-un	[kat-ra-vant-uh]
62	soixante-deux	[swa-sont-dur]	82	quatre-vingt-deux	[kat-ra-van-dur]
63	soixante-trois	[swa-sont-twa]	83	quatre-vingt-trois	[kat-ra-van-twa]
64	soixante-quatre	[swa-sont-katr]	84	quatre-vingt-quatre	[kat-ra-van-katr]
65	soixante-cinq	[swa-sont-sank]	85	quatre-vingt-cinq	[kat-ra-van-sank]
66	soixante-six	[swa-sont-sees]	86	quatre-vingt-six	[kat-ra-van-sees]
67	soixante-sept	[swa-sont-set]	87	quatre-vingt-sept	[kat-ra-van-set]
68	soixante-huit	[swa-sont-weet]	88	quatre-vingt-huit	[kat-ra-van-weet]
69	soixante-neuf	[swa-sont-nurf]	89	quatre-vingt-neuf	[kat-ra-van-nurf]
70	soixante-dix	[swa-sont-dees]	90	quatre-vingt-dix	[kat-ra-van-dees]
71	soixante-et-onze	[swa-sont-ay-onz]	91	quatre-vingt-onze	[kat-ra-van-onz]
72	soixante-douze	[swa-sont-dooz]	92	quatre-vingt-douze	[kat-ra-van-dooz]
73	soixante-treize	[swa-sont-trez]	93	quatre-vingt-treize	[kat-ra-van- trez]
74	soixante-quatorze	[swa-sont-katorz]	94	quatre-vingt-quatorze	[kat-ra-van-katorz]
75	soixante-quinze	[swa-sont-kanz]	95	quatre-vingt-quinze	[kat-ra-van- kanz]
76	soixante-seize	[swa-sont-sez]	96	quatre-vingt-seize	[kat-ra-van- sez]
77	soixante-dix-sept	[swa-sont-dee-set]	97	quatre-vingt-dix-sept	[kat-ra-van- dee-set]
78	soixante-dix-huit	[swa-sont-dees-weet]	98	quatre-vingt-dix-huit	[kat-ra-van- dees-weet]
79	soixante-dix-neuf	[swa-sont-dees-nurf]	99	quatre-vingt-dix-neuf	[kat-ra-van- dees-nurf]
80	quatre-vingts	[kat-ra-van]	100	cent	[son]

NEGATION

NEGATION

Negating French verbs requires two words, typically placed around the conjugated verb. The most common negation is **ne + verb + pas**.

Examples:
*Je **ne** sais **pas**.* (I don't know.)
*Elle **ne** mange **pas** de pain.* (She doesn't eat bread.)
*Nous **n'**avons **pas** assez d'argent.** (We don't have enough money.)

   *Note that ne becomes n' before a verb beginning with a vowel.

Of course, there are many other ways of negating French verbs, depending on what you want to say:

Ne + verb + jamais = never
   Example: *Il **ne** boit **jamais** de lait.* (He never drinks milk.)

Ne + verb + rien = nothing
   Example: *Non, je **ne** veux **rien**.* (No, I do not want anything.)

Ne + verb + personne = no one
   Example: *Je **n'**entends **personne**.* (I don't hear anyone.)

Ne + verb + aucun(e)* = none/not any
   Example: *Je **n'**ai **aucune** idée.* (I have no idea.)
   *Note that aucun(e) agrees with the noun—since "idée" is feminine, aucun becomes aucune.

Ne + verb + que = only
   Example: *Je **n'**ai que deux amis.* (I only have two friends.)

NEGATION

Informal Negation

In written or formal French, you will always see the two-part constructions mentioned on the last page. In informal French, however, the *ne* is often dropped. You'll hear this in movies, on TV, and in conversations amongst native speakers.

Examples:

Je ne sais pas. → Je sais pas. (I don't know.)

Il ne boit jamais de lait. → Il boit jamais de lait. (He never drinks milk.)

PLURAL NOUNS

PLURAL NOUNS

Just like in English, most French nouns take –s at the end in the plural form.
    Example: un fleur → des fleurs

Of course, as with all things French, there are many exceptions to the rule. Use these guidelines to help remember the various French plurals:

- **Nouns that end in *-s, -z, -x* do not change in the plural form.**
  un fils → des fils
  un gaz → des gaz
  une voix → des voix

- **Nouns that end in *-eau, -au, -eu* take on an *-x* in the plural.**
  un tableau → des tableaux
  un tuyau → des tuyaux
  un jeu → des jeux

- **There are seven nouns that end in *-ou* which take on an *–x* in the plural.**
  un bijou → des bijoux
  un caillou → des cailloux
  un chou → des choux
  un genou →des genoux

PLURAL NOUNS

- **Some nouns* that end in *-ail* or *-al* take on *-aux* in the plural.**
  un travail → des travaux
  un émail → des émaux
  un animal → des animaux
  un journal → des journaux

  *Others, however, follow the general add an *-s* rule. For example:
  un bal → des bals
  un carnaval → des carnavals
  un festival → des festivals

- There are, of course, a number of **irregular plurals** that simply need to be memorized, including:
  un œil → des yeux
  un jeune homme → des jeunes gens
  un monsieur → des messieurs
  une madame → des mesdames
  une mademoiselle → des mesdemoiselles
  un ciel → des cieux

- **Proper nouns do not change** in the plural. Only the article does:
  les Goldman, les Roi, les Fabre.

ASKING QUESTIONS

ASKING QUESTIONS

Question Words	
Who	Qui
What	Que/Quoi
When	Quand
Where	Où
Why	Pourquoi
How	Comment

Est-ce-que

Adding "Est-ce que" to the beginning of a sentence is a very common way of forming a yes or no question.

> Example: *Est-ce que tu veux aller à la plage?* (Do you want to go to the beach?)
>
> Example: *Est-ce qu'ils ont faim?* (Are they hungry?)

When you need a little more of a response than "yes" or "no", you can add any of the question words about in front of "est-ce-que".

> Example: *Où est-ce que ma voiture?* (Where is my car?)
>
> Example: *Quand est-ce que la fête des mères?* (When is Mother's Day?)
>
> Example: *Qu'est-ce que c'est?** (What is it?)

*Note: Que becomes qu' when added to "est-ce que", because it begins with a vowel.

ASKING QUESTIONS

Inversion

Another very common way of asking questions is to invert a sentence, or swap the order of the subject and the verb. Inversion is typically more formal than other interrogative forms, but it can be tricky sometimes to figure out the subject and verb of a sentence and its order.

For example, you could ask *Est-ce que tu veux venir avec nous?* (Do you want to come with us?) Or, you could invert the subject (tu/you) and the verb (veux/want): *Veux-tu venir avec nous?*

    Example: *Parlez-vous français?* (Do you speak French?)
    Example: *Aiment-ils la malbouffe?* (Do they like junk food?)

As with est-ce que, you can also use question words with inversion to form more complex questions:

    Example: *Quand allez-vous savoir?* (When will you know?)
    Example: *Pourquoi a t-il quitté?* (Why did he quit?)
    * Note: When using inversion with il, elle, or on, with a verb that ends in a vowel, add t-between the verb and subject.

ASKING QUESTIONS

Intonation

Changing intonation is, of course, the easiest way for non-native French speakers to ask a question. You don't need to add any words or change their order, you just need to change the tone of your voice!

Make sure that your voice rises at the end of the sentence, which will change your sentence from being declarative to interrogative. We have the same concept in English. You could say "She's pregnant." But when you change your intonation and raise the pitch at the end, it becomes "She's *pregnant?*"

This is the simplest, least formal way to ask questions.

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