



Essential French Phrases

ExpatsatHome Essential Guide

Your Ultimate Guide to Essential French Phrases in Belgium

Hello and welcome to Belgium! You've navigated the move, unpacked the boxes, and now you're ready to explore your new home. But have you ever had that moment? You've spent time learning a language, you feel prepared, and then you step into a local bakery to buy a croissant... and you don't understand half of what they're saying back to you.

It's a common experience for expats, and it can feel a little defeating. The French you learned in a textbook might not be the exact French you hear on the streets of Brussels, Liège, or Namur.

This guide is here to fix that. We'll give you the practical, essential French phrases you **actually** need for daily life in Belgium. More importantly, we'll dive into the key differences in Belgian French so you can navigate conversations with confidence and feel more at home.

Understanding Belgian French: The Key Differences

First things first: French from France and Belgian French are mutually intelligible. You won't be completely lost. However, knowing the local nuances in pronunciation, vocabulary, and numbers will make your daily interactions smoother and show locals that you've made an effort to connect. These differences stem from historical reasons and the influence of Dutch and other Germanic languages in Belgium.

The Famous Numbers: Septante & Nonante

This is the most famous and practical difference. In Belgium, the numbers for 70 and 90 are logical and straightforward.

The Belgian Number System

- **70 in Belgium is septante.**
- **90 in Belgium is nonante.**

In France, they use a more complex system:

- 70 in France is **soixante-dix** (literally "sixty-ten").
- 90 in France is **quatre-vingt-dix** (literally "four-twenty-ten").

💡 Tip: While Belgians will understand **soixante-dix**, using **septante** and **nonante** is a small change that makes a big difference. It immediately signals that you're familiar with local customs and makes calculations (especially when paying for things) much easier.

Unique Belgian Vocabulary & Expressions

You'll quickly notice some words and phrases that are unique to Belgium. Here are some of the most common ones you'll encounter.

Belgian French	French from France	Meaning & Context
Drache	Il pleut des cordes	A heavy downpour or torrential rain. A very common word, given the Belgian weather! Example: " <i>Quelle drache aujourd'hui !</i> "
À tantôt	À plus tard / À tout à l'heure	"See you later (today)." This is considered a bit old-fashioned in France but is very common and friendly in Belgium.
Crollés	Cheveux bouclés	Curly hair. You might hear someone say: " <i>J'ai les cheveux crollés.</i> "
S'il vous plaît	Voilà	When someone hands you something (your change, your coffee), they will often say " <i>S'il vous plaît.</i> " It means both "please" and "here you are," a direct influence from the Dutch " <i>alstublieft.</i> "
Une fois	(No direct equivalent)	A filler word often added to the end of a command or request to soften it. It does not literally mean "one time." Example: " <i>Viens voir une fois</i> " just means "Come and see."

Pronunciation and Accent

While there are many regional accents, there are a few general characteristics of the Belgian accent:

- **The "R" sound:** The Belgian 'R' is often softer and less guttural than the Parisian 'R'. It's pronounced more towards the front of the mouth.
- **Pacing:** The overall accent can have a "dragging quality," sounding slightly slower and more melodic compared to the faster pace of Parisian French.

⚠ **Important:** Please, do not worry about having a perfect accent. The goal is communication, not perfection. As long as you are trying, people will appreciate the effort.

Your Survival Kit: Essential Phrases by Category

Now that you know the key differences, let's build your foundation with phrases you'll use every single day. We recommend practicing these out loud.

Greetings & Politeness (The Foundation)


These are non-negotiable. Using them shows respect and opens the door for a positive interaction. Always say *Bonjour* when entering a shop, office, or waiting room.

French Phrase	English Meaning & When to Use
Bonjour	Hello. (Formal, used all day until the evening).
Bonsoir	Good evening.
Salut	Hi / Bye. (Informal, for friends, family, and colleagues you know well).

Ça va?	How are you? (Can be both a question and an answer: “Ça va?” “Oui, ça va, et toi?”).
Au revoir	Goodbye. (Formal).
S’il vous plaît	Please / Here you are.
Merci (beaucoup)	Thank you (very much).
De rien / Il n’y a pas de quoi	You’re welcome.
Excusez-moi / Pardon	Excuse me / Sorry.

At the Shop or Restaurant

Navigating daily errands like grocery shopping or ordering a meal will be a huge confidence booster.

 **Tip:** The phrase “**Je voudrais...**” (I would like...) is the most polite and common way to ask for something. It’s much better than the more direct “**Je veux...**” (I want...).

French Phrase	English Meaning & Context
Je voudrais un café, s’il vous plaît.	I would like a coffee, please.
C’est combien? / Ça coûte combien?	How much is it? / How much does it cost?
L’addition, s’il vous plaît.	The bill, please.
Avez-vous...?	Do you have...?
Je cherche...	I’m looking for...
Je regarde juste, merci.	I’m just looking, thank you. (Useful in clothing stores).
Par carte? / En espèces (liquide)?	By card? / In cash?
Un sac, s’il vous plaît.	A bag, please.

Asking for Help & Clarification

Don’t be afraid to admit you’re lost or don’t understand. People are generally happy to help.

French Phrase	English Meaning & Context
Je ne comprends pas.	I don’t understand.
Je ne parle pas bien français.	I don’t speak French well.
Parlez-vous anglais?	Do you speak English?
Pouvez-vous répéter, s’il vous plaît?	Can you repeat, please?
Pouvez-vous parler plus lentement?	Can you speak more slowly?
Comment dit-on... en français?	How do you say... in French?
Où sont les toilettes?	Where are the toilets?
Où est la gare / l’arrêt de bus?	Where is the train station / the bus stop?

Common Mistakes & How to Avoid Them

Learning a new language involves making mistakes! Here are a few common pitfalls for newcomers in Belgium.

⚠ **Important: 1. Worrying too much about the numbers.** Don't get flustered. Just learn the Belgian way from the start: **septante** (70) and **nonante** (90). It's easier and shows you've done your local homework.

2. Translating everything literally. Remember phrases like “**une fois**”? It's not “one time.” Language is about context, not just individual words. Listen to how people use phrases in daily life.

3. Being afraid to speak. This is the biggest mistake. Your French doesn't need to be perfect. Using your survival phrases with a smile will get you much further than staying silent. Belgians will appreciate the effort.

Your First Week French Checklist

Give yourself some small, achievable goals for your first week. Check them off as you go!

- ☐ Say “Bonjour” and “Au revoir” every time you enter and leave a shop.
- ☐ Successfully order a coffee or a pastry using “Je voudrais...”
- ☐ Use “septante” or “nonante” when hearing or discussing a price.
- ☐ Ask for the bill in a restaurant with “L'addition, s'il vous plaît.”
- ☐ Understand when someone hands you something and says “S'il vous plaît.”
- ☐ Ask for directions to a place you already know, just for practice.
- ☐ Give a simple answer to “Ça va?”

Insider Tips & Resources

💡 **Tip:** Learning a language is a marathon, not a sprint. Be patient with yourself. Every small conversation, even just buying bread successfully, is a victory. Celebrate your progress!

Recommended Language Apps for Belgium

Based on recent 2026 reviews and expat needs, here are some excellent apps to supplement your learning:

- **Babbel:** A great all-around choice with solid grammar explanations and practical, real-life dialogues. Excellent value for money.
- **Pimsleur:** Perfect for auditory learners. Its audio-focused lessons are great for practicing pronunciation during a commute.
- **TV5MONDE EDU:** A fantastic **free** option that uses videos from the French-speaking world, **including Brussels**. This is an excellent way to get used to the specific accents and rhythms you'll hear in Belgium.

Learning the local language is one of the most rewarding parts of the expat journey. It turns a foreign country into a true home. We hope this guide helps you take those first steps with confidence.

Bonne chance et à tantôt ! (Good luck and see you later!)

