

Language and culture guide

French

Language experts agree that language learning is most effective when language and culture are linked. *The Polyglots* apps aim to spark children's interest in language and culture through play. This guide provides some general information about France and French culture and language that may be of interest to you and may extend children's learning.

About France

France, known as 'the hexagon' for its shape, is the largest country in Western Europe. It has borders with Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Italy, Germany, Andorra and Spain. About 67 million people live there (in comparison, about 28 million people live in Australia). There are also overseas departments of France – French territory in places such as French Polynesia and New Caledonia in the Pacific Ocean.

Early childhood education in France

Nursery school in France caters for children 2–6 years old. It is part of the primary education system and there is a strong focus on structured learning in reading, writing and numbers as well as creative activities and games. In 2024, more than 99 per cent of French children attended early childhood education.¹

Language

French is spoken by approximately 321 million people in 51 countries around the world. It is the second most widely learned language in the world after English. Originally, there were many regional French dialects, and outside 'the hexagon' there are many variations, such as African French, Vietnamese French and Canadian French. French is a gendered language, which means most nouns are masculine or feminine.

For correct pronunciation, listen carefully to the words as they are spoken in the app or in the sound library in the app toolkit on the ELLA website.

Culture

Many ethnic groups from former French colonies contribute to French culture, in particular to the rich variety of food available. North African couscous has become a national French dish. A large number of French people are Roman Catholic but many other religions are practised in France.

Politeness and customs

- Say hello ('Bonjour, monsieur' or 'Bonjour, madame') when you first meet someone, and shake their hand. When you are leaving, say goodbye ('Au revoir') and shake their hand again.
- In a small shop you should say hello and goodbye to the person serving.
- When you first meet someone, use the formal form of 'you' (vous) until asked to use the familiar form (tu). Likewise, don't use a given name until invited to. However, adults always speak informally and use given names with children.
- Friends and family greet and farewell each other with a kiss on both cheeks. If someone offers their cheek, you are invited to this level of intimacy.
- Pointing or beckoning with your index finger is considered rude. Use your open hand to indicate.
- French children are expected to be well behaved in a social setting. There is no such thing as a 'children's menu' at a restaurant.

Culture in *The Polyglots* apps

As children play with the apps, they can discover fun and intriguing French cultural references such as a croissant, cheese and snail (escargot). You can learn more about the cultural references in the app toolkit.



¹ 'Gross enrollment rate, early childhood education (%)', Human Capital Project, World Bank, 2026, https://humancapital.worldbank.org/en/indicator/WB_HCP_ECEDU

Interesting topics

Animals	• Deer and wild boar (relatives of domestic pigs) live in the forests. • Antelope and brown bears can be found in the mountains. • Millions of migrating birds stop over on the Mediterranean coastline, including thousands of pink flamingoes. • French people love pets, and can take their dogs with them to restaurants.
Arts	France is rich in the arts, including dance, theatre, films, music, architecture, literature and painting. • Famous Impressionist artists include Monet and Renoir. • The singer Edith Piaf ('piaf' is slang for 'sparrow') is revered in France. • Asterix and Obelix are popular French comic book characters. • <i>The Little Prince</i> is a well-loved illustrated book about a lonely young boy.
Food	Food has a special role in French culture. Traditionally, meals were leisurely and had many courses, but today long meals are for special occasions. Even so, sharing a meal with family every day is very important. French people shop daily for food, usually from local markets and small shops. Discussion about regional foods is common. • Wine and cheese are France's most famous products. There are more than 300 varieties of cheese and every region in France has its own specialties. • Famous French dishes include bouillabaisse (fish soup), quiche Lorraine and beef bourguignon (beef in red wine). • A bread stick (baguette) is eaten with every meal. • Hot chocolate is a common breakfast drink for children. • A croissant is a crescent-shaped French pastry that is often eaten for breakfast. It is made by folding butter into dough over and over before baking, so that the end result is very flaky.
Sports	• The most popular game in France is football (soccer), followed by tennis. • The Tour de France bike race zigzags across France every summer. • Skiing is very popular in the French Alps in winter.
Games	Traditional games include: • escargot: similar to hopscotch but in the shape of a snail • bilboquet: catching a ball that is attached by string to a cup • boules (or pétanque): throwing a large ball as close as possible to a smaller one.





Interesting topics

Places	France is the most popular tourist destination in the world. • Paris, the capital city of France, is known for its art galleries, museums, restaurants, markets, elegant shops and river cruises. • There are many parks and gardens where people stroll and meet. A lot of people live in apartments, especially in cities, so they are used to accessing public places, promenading in the streets and catching public transport. • Every summer, an artificial beach is created on the banks of the river Seine in Paris, complete with deck chairs and beach umbrellas. • The French Riviera is known for its mild climate and beautiful coastline. • Provence is famous for its fields of lavender flowers, its olives and its perfume.
Famous monuments	Some of France's most visited sites are: • Arc de Triomphe: a powerful triumphal arch at the top of the Champs Élysées in Paris that honours those who have fought for France • Carcassonne: a fairytale castle, complete with turrets and a moat, in south-west France • Eiffel Tower: an iconic pointed tower made of iron for the 1889 World's Fair in Paris • the Louvre: a massive art gallery with the <i>Mona Lisa</i> by Leonardo da Vinci as a star attraction • Notre Dame Cathedral: a Gothic building with towers and gargoyles • Pont du Gard: a huge Roman aqueduct in the south of France.
Seasons	France is in the northern hemisphere. It has a cool, temperate climate but each region has a microclimate, with snow in the mountains and early spring in the south.
Traditions	This is just a small selection of France's many rich traditions: • Bastille Day, on 14 July, commemorates the French revolution and is celebrated with fireworks. The French national song 'La Marseillaise' is often sung. The red, white and blue French flag (le Tricolore) is displayed everywhere. • On April Fools' day, children make paper fish and tape them secretly to other people's backs. • Easter is in spring in France and many traditions symbolise new life and renewal, such as giving decorated eggs and placing spring blossom around the house. • At French weddings, it is traditional for someone to chop the top off bottles of champagne with a sword.

Note: This document contains content that has been gathered through independent research and consultation with subject matter experts. The figures and information included in this document should be reviewed for accuracy over time.