

## Why You Should Never Say "Nous" in Spoken French

If you first learned French in a classroom setting, you may have noticed something unusual: Spoken French doesn't always sound as expected, based on what you learned about written French.

That's because spoken French follows a set of unwritten rules, making it almost a different language from written French. One of these rules is that we rarely use “nous” in spoken French. Let's see what to use instead!

### “Nous” vs “On”

In textbooks, older novels and formal speeches, we use “**Nous**” to mean “We”:

**Nous allons au cinéma.** = *We are going to the cinema.*

However, in real everyday spoken French, what we actually use (and what you'll actually hear) is: “**On**” – a simple one-syllable nasal vowel!

**On va au cinéma.** = *We are going to the cinema* [everyday French]

Using “**on**” isn't slang and it's not incorrect, either! It's just how modern, everyday spoken French has evolved.

“**On**” feels more natural, makes for shorter sentences, and flows better in conversational fast-spoken French.

In casual spoken French, “**On**” is the default, while “**nous**” sounds too formal. However, in more formal settings, especially in written books, “**nous**” still holds its ground. That's because *reading* and *speaking* French follow their rules.

**Le truc en plus:** In some movies and plays, you might hear **le “Nous” de majesté** (= the “Royal We”) – a high-ranking person (especially a King, especially Louis the XIVth especially) using “**nous**” instead of the singular “**je**” – as they represented themselves, the State, their people, and their massive ego.

### How to use “on”: conjugation & other uses

You probably know about the conjugation for “on.” As a reminder, let's quickly cover the basics:

- “**Nous**” uses the **1st person plural** conjugation, ending in “**-ons**”  
**:Nous apprenons le français.** = *We're learning French.*
- “**On**” uses the **3rd person singular** conjugation, like **il / elle**:  
**On apprend le français.** = *We're learning French.*
- The conjugation for “on” is less regular but shorter.  
**Nous aimons cette chanson.** = *We like this song.* (written, formal French)  
**On aime cette chanson.** = *We like this song.* (everyday spoken French)

It's the same conjugation as

**Elle aime cette chanson.** = *She likes this song.* or

**Il aime cette chanson.** = *He likes this song.*

If you're an advanced learner, here's something fun:

**Nous sommes prêtes à partir.** = *We're ready to leave.* (**prêtes** is in the feminine plural)

In the singular, with “**Il / Elle**”, it would be

**Il est prêt à partir.** = *He's ready to leave.* or

**Elle est prête à partir.** = *She's ready to leave.*

So how would you say that with “**on**”? Think about it...

**On est prêtes à partir.** = *We're ready to leave.*

Even though the *verb* is in the third person *singular*, like “**Il / Elle**”, the adjectives remain in the *plural*. That's a bit strange grammatically, but that's why it's mainly used in everyday spoken French!. If you're not an advanced learner, don't worry about it. Just remember that spoken French has its own rules, and actually, “**on**” isn't simply a replacement for “**nous**” – there are other uses too!

“**On**” was created as an *indefinite subject* when you don't know *who* the subject is. Even in written or formal French. It's like “people in general,” “someone”, “you in general,” or a vague “they.”

**En Espagne, on se couche tard.** = *In Spain, people go to sleep late.*

**Quand on a que l'amour...** = *When the only thing one has is love... / When you only have love.*

We use “**on**” with the passive voice as well.

**Ma voiture a été volée !** = *My car was stolen.*

**On a volé ma voiture !** = *Someone stole my car. / My car has been stolen!*

It gives the same information. And here, “**on**” does *not* mean “**nous**”!

You could replace it instead with “**Quelqu'un**” = *someone, somebody.*

**Quelqu'un a volé ma voiture.** = *Someone stole my car.*

**On m'a appelée ce matin.** = *Somebody called me this morning.* = **Quelqu'un m'a appelée ce matin.**

Or even as a question:

**On vous a donné un plan ?** = *Did someone give you a plan?* = **Quelqu'un vous a donné un plan ?**

You can find “**On**” as an indefinite subject in proverbs:

**On ne peut pas avoir le beurre et l'argent du beurre.** = *You can't have your cake and eat it too.* or literally, *One can't have their butter and the money for butter.*

**On ne fait pas d'omelette sans casser des oeufs.** = *You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs.* (literally)

**On a rien sans rien.** = **No pain, no gain. / Nothing comes out of nothing.** =

**On ne change pas une équipe qui gagne.** = *Don't change a winning team.*

Finally, a more fun way of using “**on**” is as a suggestion. It’s an effortless way to suggest, “Let’s do something, what do you think?”

**On va au cinéma ?** = *Shall we go to the cinema?* Or “*Let’s go to the cinema – are you OK with the idea?*”

**On s’appelle ?** = *Let’s have a call sometime, OK?*

## Actually, French people do use “nous”!

French people never use the pronoun “**Nous**” as a subject, like the English “**We**”. We use “**On**” instead.

However, we still use “**Nous**” as an *object*, like the English “**Us**”!

So, for the pronoun “**We**”, we use “**On**.” For the pronoun “**Us**”, we use “**Nous**.”

- **C’est nous ! On est arrivés !** = *It’s us, we’re here now!*
- **Ils nous ont invités à dîner.** = *They invited us for dinner.*

We use “**nous**” after **prepositions**.

**C’est pour nous.** = *It’s for us.*

- **Bienvenue chez nous !** = *Welcome to our home!*
- **C’est à nous de prendre une décision.** = *It’s up to us to make a decision.*
- **Ils vont aller au cinéma avec nous.** = *They’re going to the cinema with us.*
- **Il habite à deux pas de chez nous.** = *He lives a stone’s throw away from us.*
- **Vous pouvez toujours compter sur nous.** = *You can always count on us.*

With “**on**”, we can also use possessive adjectives for the 1st person plural, such as “**notre**” or “**nos**”.

- **On a vendu notre maison l’année dernière.** = *We sold our house last year.*
- **On va emmener nos enfants au cirque ce week-end.** = *We’re going to take our children to the circus this weekend.*

More confusingly, you’ll also hear **informal** French sentences like:

- **Nous, on est prêts.** = *We’re ready.*

It’s a repetition of the subject and a very common way to stress it. It’s saying implicitly, “We’re ready, but *you’re* not”, or “while *they’re* not.” It’s like

- **Moi, je sais.** = *I know (contrary to someone else.)* or
- **Toi, tu n’as pas de problème.** = *You don’t have any problem (but implicitly, I do).*
- **Nous, on est là.** = *We’re here.*

There’s one more thing subtly with the pronouns here. It’s about the difference between “**On nous a vu.**” = *Someone saw us.* And “**On s’est vu.**” = *We saw each other.*

Let’s jump into some practice exercises together!

“**Nous**” = “Us” = when something happens to us from the outside.

- **Il nous voit.** = *He’s seeing us.*
- **Ils nous voient.** = *They’re seeing us.*
- **On nous voit.** = *Someone is seeing us.* (Here, “**On**” is explicitly passive voice.)

However, “**nous**” is also a *reflective* pronoun (meaning both “ourselves” or “each other between us”) – but only when used with “**Nous**” as a subject in formal or written French :

- **Nous nous voyons.** = *We’re seeing each other, we’re seeing ourselves* (formal).

However, for “**On**”, the reflective pronoun (“ourselves” or “each other among us”) is simply “**se**”. Just like all 3rd person in French:

- **Il se voit.** = *He’s seeing himself.*
- **Elles se voient.** = *They’re seeing themselves. / They’re seeing each other.* (feminine)
- **On se voit.** = *We’re seeing each other. / We’re seeing ourselves* (everyday spoken French)

Or, in short :

- **On nous voit.** = *Someone is seeing us.* (passive voice; if the subject “on” was about “us”, it would be a reflective pronoun).
- **On se voit.** = *We’re seeing each other. / We’re seeing ourselves.* (everyday spoken French)

## Practice Makes Perfect!

To translate the pronoun “We”, French people use “**Nous**” in formal French and “**On**” in spoken French. So let’s practice now.

- Here’s a sentence in formal French:  
**Nous sommes au restaurant.** = *We are at the restaurant.*  
 How would you say that in everyday spoken French?  
**On est au restaurant.** (verb **être** = *to be*, 3rd person of singular)
- Here’s a sentence in everyday French:  
**On chante ensemble.** = *We’re singing together.*  
 How would you make it sound more formal?  
**Nous chantons ensemble.** (With “nous”, you add a “-ons” at the end of the verb.)
- Here’s a sentence in English:  
*We love Paris.*  
 How would you translate it into everyday French AND formal written French? Use the verb **Aimer** = *to love*.  
**Nous aimons Paris.** (formal French with “nous”)  
**On aime Paris.** (everyday spoken French)

4. Let's mix things up. Fill in the three blanks with either “on” or “nous”:
- \_\_\_\_\_ **prenons le train ce matin.** = *We're taking the train this morning.*
  - \_\_\_\_\_ **va à la plage demain?** = *Shall we go to the beach tomorrow?* (everyday French)
  - Ils \_\_\_\_\_ ont donné un cadeau.** = *They gave us a present.* (everyday spoken French)

Answers:

- Nous prenons le train ce matin.** (“prenons” ends in “ons” so it comes with “nous”)
- On va à la plage demain ?** (“va” is “aller” = to go, in the 3rd person, and it's a common way to suggest in French.)
- Ils nous ont donné un cadeau.** (“nous” is not a subject pronoun, so we still use it in everyday French!)

Transform these passive voice sentences to make “On” the subject.

For example: **La voiture a été volée.** → **On a volé la voiture.** = *The car was stolen.* → *Someone stole the car.*

- La cloche est sonnée toutes les heures.** = *The bell is rung every hour.*
- Le ménage n'a jamais été fait.** = *Housekeeping has never been done here.*
- On est vus !** = *We're being seen!*

Answers:

- On sonne la cloche toutes les heures.** = *Someone rings the bell every hour.*
- On n'a jamais fait le ménage.** = *No one had ever cleaned, here.*
- On nous voit !** = *Someone sees us!*

**Homework:**

Using the vocabulary you know or learned from the video lesson, create 10 sentences in spoken French using “On.” That is your chance to be creative and apply everything you've learned!