

French Verbs with Prepositions

The Difference between Jouer à and jouer de

Saying “to play” in French initially seems straightforward: **jouer**. However, do you know the difference between **jouer à** and **jouer de**? French verbs with **prepositions**, such as **jouer** can be challenging to get to grips with as a French learner.

The tricky part of translating “to play” in French is that we need to take into consideration what it is you are playing. This is because if you are talking about playing a **sport** or a **game**, you are going to use one preposition, whereas if you are talking about **playing a musical instrument**, you are going to use a different preposition.

How to say “to play” in French

The verb “to play” in French is **jouer**. Before we get into prepositions, let’s start by reviewing the conjugation of **jouer** in the present tense, so that you can use the verb in all its forms.

The good news is that **jouer** is a regular **-er** verb in the present tense, which means that it follows the usual pattern of other **-er** verbs.

jouer conjugation – present tense:

je joue	I play
tu joues	you play (informal singular)
il/elle/on joue	he/she/we play
nous jouons	we play
vous jouez	you play (formal singular or informal/formal plural)
ils/elles jouent	they play

French verbs with prepositions: ‘jouer à’ vs ‘jouer de’

As we said earlier, getting used to French verbs with prepositions can be challenging. This is because there are many verbs in French that require a preposition following the verb, and that preposition can change the meaning of the verb.

When it comes to the verb **jouer**, this means that we need to understand the difference between **jouer à** and **jouer de**.

Translating “to play” in French: sports and games

When you’re talking about playing a sport or a game in French, you use **jouer à**. That is to say that we conjugate the verb **jouer**, add the preposition **à**, then add the word for the sport or game.

Let’s look at some examples of “to play” in French, followed by the preposition **à** and a sport or game.

First of all, let’s see **jouer à** followed by sports or games that are **feminine singular** nouns:

Je joue à la marelle. *I play hopscotch.*

Je joue à la pétanque. *I play pétanque.*

Next, with sports that are **masculine singular** nouns:

Je joue au foot. *I play football / soccer.*

Je joue au rugby. *I play rugby.*

Now, with sports or games that are **plural** nouns:

Je joue aux fléchettes. *I play darts.*

Je joue aux cartes. *I play cards.*

Finally, here's an example with a sport that starts with a vowel. We will therefore see **à + l'**:

Je joue à l'ultimate frisbee. *I play ultimate frisbee.*

In summary, to say "to play" in French, followed by a **sport** or a **game**, use **jouer à**.

Translating "to play" in French: musical instruments

What about playing a musical instrument, rather than a sport or a game? In this case, we're not going to use **jouer à**, but **jouer de**.

Pay attention to how the preposition **de** combines with the definite articles **le** and **les** as you look at the next examples.

Let's start with **jouer de** followed by a musical instrument that is a **feminine singular** noun:

Je joue de la guitare. *I play the guitar.*

Now, with a musical instrument that is a masculine singular noun:

Je joue du piano. *I play the piano.*

An example of a plural noun for a musical instrument could be:

Je joue des maracas. *I play the maracas.*

And one that starts with a vowel:

Je joue de l'accordéon. *I play the accordion.*

Remember that nouns that start with a silent **h-** are treated the same as nouns that start with a vowel. For example:

Je joue de l'harmonica. *I play the harmonica.*

However, if a noun starts with an aspirated **h-**, it is treated the same as nouns that start with a consonant. Here, therefore, we will see the combination of **de + le = du**:

Je joue du hautbois. *I play the oboe.*

To summarise, to say "to play" in French, followed by a musical instrument, use **jouer de**.

jouer à + sport / game	je joue au fléchettes et au volleyball I play darts and volleyball
jouer de + instrument	Il joue du piano He plays the piano