

## How to use the word “on” in French

You’ve probably come across the word **on** in French many times. It’s a very versatile word, but this means that it can be challenging to fully understand its meaning at times.

### French subject pronouns

First things first, let’s do a quick review of the French subject pronouns. Typically, when you’re looking at a verb table or practising conjugations in French, the verb is divided up into its six forms, with the subject pronouns listed as follows:

<b>je</b>	– “I”
<b>tu</b>	– “you” (informal singular)
<b>il, elle, on</b>	– “he, she, one/you/we”
<b>nous</b>	– “we”
<b>vous</b>	– “you” (formal singular or informal/formal plural)
<b>ils, elles</b>	– “they”

As we look into the uses of **on**, remember that it is included on the same line as **il** and **elle** because it uses the same form of the conjugated verb. So, when conjugating verbs with **on**, you treat it like you would **il** or **elle** (for example, **on mange** or **on parle**).

The key thing to remember here is that the third line – **il, elle, on** – does not translate to “he, she, it”. The subject pronoun **on** can be translated in various ways, but it doesn’t mean “it”.

### What does ‘on’ mean in French?

After this brief recap, the question remains: what does **on** mean in French? In fact, the versatile pronoun **on** has three main uses and meanings. Let’s look at them below!

#### When ‘on’ means “we”

In informal settings, **on** is very often used instead of the subject pronoun **nous**. In these situations, **on** therefore simply means “we”.

**On** is less formal than **nous** and more commonly used in spoken French. For example, at the start of the video this fact sheet is based on, Mark asked Max:

« **De quoi parle-t-on aujourd’hui ?** »                      “What are we talking about today?”

It would have been equally correct to use **nous** and say:

« **De quoi parlons-nous aujourd’hui ?** »                      “What are we talking about today?”

This sounds much more formal to a native French speaker. In standard, written French, however, remember to use **nous** instead of **on**.

Let’s look at some more examples where **on** is used instead of **nous** to mean “we”.

<b>Si tu veux, on peut déjeuner ensemble.</b>	<i>If you want, we can have lunch together.</i>
<b>On va au cinéma samedi ?</b>	<i>Shall we go to the cinema on Saturday?</i>
<b>On se voit demain soir ?</b>	<i>Shall we see each other tomorrow evening?</i>

In the example “on se voit demain soir?”, note that the reflexive pronoun used (**se**) matches the third person singular form of the verb, the same as in **il** and **elle**.

Using the **nous** form instead, this sentence would be:

**Nous nous voyons demain soir ?**                      *Shall we see each other tomorrow evening?*

## When ‘on’ refers to people in general

The second use of the French pronoun **on** is to refer to everyone. That is to say that **on** can be used to make generalisations about what groups of people do.

In this sense, **on** can be compared to “one” in English. However, although “one” is rarely used outside very formal situations in English, **on** is completely neutral and natural in French.

Let’s look at some examples and notice how **on** can be translated in various ways when it refers to people in general.

**En France, on mange beaucoup de fromage.**     *In France, people eat a lot of cheese.*  
**En Italie, on parle italien.**     *In Italy, everyone speaks Italian.*  
**En Écosse, on doit s’habituer à la pluie.**     *In Scotland, you have to get used to the rain.*

We’ve therefore seen how **on** can refer to “we” or to people in general. However, there is a third use of the pronoun **on** in French, so let’s look at this one now.

## When ‘on’ refers to an unidentified person

The third use of this subject pronoun in French is when it refers to an unidentified or unspecified person. So, what does **on** mean in French in these contexts? Well, in this scenario, **on** is like saying “someone” in English.

Consider these examples:

**On a frappé à la porte.**     *Someone knocked at the door. / There was a knock at the door.*

**On m’a volé mon portefeuille.**     *Someone stole my wallet. / My wallet was stolen.*  
 This is just like saying: **Quelqu’un m’a volé mon portefeuille.**     *Someone stole my wallet.*

In the sentences above, since the identity of the subject is unknown, we can use **on** in French.

**On nous\* a demandé de sortir.**     *We were asked to leave. / They asked us to leave.*  
**On nous\* a dit que le musée était fermé aujourd’hui.**     *We were told that the museum is closed today. / They told us that the museum is closed today.*

In these two examples, it is likely that the identity of the person or people is known, but it isn’t important to the conversation, which is why **on** is used.

\*Watch out for the **nous** in these examples. This isn’t to be confused with the subject pronoun **nous**. Instead, this **nous** is an indirect object pronoun, indicating that it was “us” that they asked to leave.

That’s it for the three uses of the pronoun **on** in French. Before we finish, let’s focus on one final aspect of this interesting pronoun.

## Using possessive adjectives with ‘on’

We’ve now answered our main question: what does **on** mean in French? But there are still a couple of interesting points to consider.

Earlier, we saw that when **on** is used with a **reflexive** verb, it uses the third person singular reflexive pronoun **se**.

For example:

**En Écosse, on doit s’habituer à la pluie.**     *In Scotland, you have to get used to the rain.*

However, there is another interesting aspect of agreement when using **on**, which we need to keep in mind, and that is with **possessive adjectives**.

Let’s start by looking at the following question using the subject pronoun **nous**:

**Est-ce que nous avons fait nos valises ?**     *Have we packed our suitcases?*

If we replace **nous** with **on**, something interesting happens!

**Est-ce qu’on a fait nos valises ?**                     *Have we packed our suitcases?*

Did you expect **nous** to change to **ses**? In fact, because the possessive adjective means “our” here, we still use the adjective associated with **nous** (**notre** in the singular or **nos** in the plural), in order to follow the same meaning.

However, there are other situations in which we would use the possessive adjective **son**, **sa** or **ses** with **on**. For example:

**On doit prendre son passeport pour voyager.**     *One must take one’s passport to travel. / You must take your passport to travel.*

In this situation, since **on** refers to people in general, rather than “us”, the correct possessive adjective to use is **son**, rather than **notre**.

So, when **on** means “**we**”, use the possessive adjective **notre** or **nos**. When **on** means “everyone”, “one” or a general “you”, use the possessive adjective **son**, **sa** or **ses**.

### A summary of what ‘on’ means in French and when to use it

We	On va à la plage We’re going to the beach
Everyone / one / people	En France, on parle français In France, people speak French
Someone	On a frappé à la porte Someone knocked on the door