

Adjectives — Grammar Capsule

Companion reference for the Adjectives drill: agreement, word order (BAGS), and the 30 meaning-shift adjectives.

Part 1 — The Rules

1. Agreement — gender and number

Every French adjective agrees with the noun it describes, in gender (masculine/feminine) and number (singular/plural).

Regular pattern

Form	Rule	Example
Feminine	add -e	<i>grand</i> → <i>grande</i>
Plural	add -s	<i>grand</i> → <i>grands</i>
Feminine plural	add -es	<i>grand</i> → <i>grandes</i>

Adjectives already ending in **-e** don't change for feminine (*moderne* stays *moderne*). Adjectives already ending in **-s/-x** don't change for masculine plural (*heureux* stays *heureux*).

Common irregular feminines

Masculine ending	Feminine ending	Example
-eux	-euse	<i>heureux</i> → <i>heureuse</i>
-if	-ive	<i>actif</i> → <i>active</i>
-er	-ère	<i>léger</i> → <i>légère</i>
-l / -n / -s / -t (doubled)	+ -e	<i>gentil</i> → <i>gentille</i> , <i>bon</i> → <i>bonne</i> , <i>gros</i> → <i>grosse</i>
-c	-che / -que	<i>blanc</i> → <i>blanche</i>

The beau/nouveau/vieux family

These three are the irregulars worth memorizing cold — each has a *fourth* form used only directly before a masculine singular noun starting with a vowel sound or mute h:

	Masc. (consonant)	Masc. (vowel/mute h)	Fem.	Masc. pl.	Fem. pl.
beau	beau	bel	belle	beaux	belles
nouveau	nouveau	nouvel	nouvelle	nouveaux	nouvelles
vieux	vieux	vieil	vieille	vieux	vieilles

Un beau jardin but *un bel homme* — not *un beau homme*. This elided form only exists in that one narrow slot (before the noun, masculine, singular, vowel/mute h) — everywhere else, use the ordinary masculine form.

2. Word order — BAGS

Most French adjectives go **after** the noun. A small set goes **before** instead — remembered with the mnemonic **BAGS**:

BAGS	Category	Examples
B	Beauty	beau, joli
A	Age	jeune, vieux, nouveau
G	Goodness	bon, mauvais
S	Size	grand, petit, gros, haut

Un beau jardin, un jeune homme, un bon film, une petite table. Everything outside this short list defaults to after the noun: *une voiture rouge, un livre intéressant, une histoire difficile*.

Article note. *Des* becomes *de* (*d'* before a vowel sound) when a BAGS adjective sits directly before a plural noun: *de grandes maisons*, not *des grandes maisons*. This only applies when the adjective is doing the work of pushing the article to *de* — after the noun, the article stays *des* as usual (*des maisons modernes*).

3. Meaning-shift adjectives

Thirty adjectives keep the same word but change meaning depending on position. There's no single derivation rule — each pair has to be learned — but as a rough pattern, **before** the noun tends toward a more figurative or subjective sense, and **after** tends toward the literal, physical, or objective one.

Adjective	Before the noun	After the noun
ancien	former (<i>mon ancien château</i>)	old, ancient (<i>un château ancien</i>)
brave	good, decent (<i>un brave homme</i>)	brave, courageous (<i>un homme brave</i>)
certain	a certain, some (<i>une certaine idée</i>)	sure, certain (<i>une idée certaine</i>)
cher	dear, beloved (<i>mon cher ami</i>)	expensive (<i>une voiture chère</i>)
chic	nice, decent (<i>un chic type</i>)	stylish (<i>un type chic</i>)
curieux	strange, odd (<i>une histoire curieuse</i>)	curious, inquisitive (<i>un enfant curieux</i>)
dernier	final, last in a series (<i>la dernière chance</i>)	most recent, last (calendar) (<i>l'année dernière</i>)
différent(s)	various, several (<i>différentes idées</i>)	different, not alike (<i>des idées différentes</i>)

Adjective	Before the noun	After the noun
drôle	strange, odd (<i>une drôle de femme</i>)	funny (<i>une femme drôle</i>)
faible	slight (<i>une faible chance</i>)	weak (<i>des résultats faibles</i>)
fameux	great, first-rate (<i>un fameux repas</i>)	well-known, notorious (<i>un restaurant fameux</i>)
grand	great (person's stature) (<i>un grand homme</i>)	tall (physical height) (<i>un homme grand</i>)
honnête	decent, respectable (<i>un honnête citoyen</i>)	honest, truthful (<i>une réponse honnête</i>)
jeune	young (<i>un jeune homme</i>)	(rarely used after in this sense)
maigre	meager, scant (<i>un maigre repas</i>)	thin, skinny (<i>un chat maigre</i>)
modeste	simple, humble (<i>une modeste maison</i>)	modest (personality) (<i>un homme modeste</i>)
même	the very same (<i>le même jour</i>)	that very one, itself (<i>ce jour même</i>)
nouveau	new, to the owner (<i>un nouveau livre</i>)	newly made/published (<i>un livre nouveau</i>)
pauvre	unfortunate, pitiable (<i>le pauvre homme</i>)	poor, penniless (<i>un homme pauvre</i>)
prochain	next in a series (<i>la prochaine fois</i>)	next (calendar) (<i>le mois prochain</i>)
propre	own (<i>ma propre voiture</i>)	clean (<i>une voiture propre</i>)
pur	sheer, mere (<i>par pur hasard</i>)	pure, unmixed (<i>de l'eau pure</i>)
sacré	(informal) great, awesome (<i>un sacré livre</i>)	holy, sacred (<i>un lieu sacré</i>)
sale	nasty, mean (<i>un sale type</i>)	dirty, unclean (<i>des mains sales</i>)
seul	only, sole (<i>la seule femme</i>)	alone, single (<i>une femme seule</i>)
simple	mere, just a (<i>une simple question</i>)	simple, easy (<i>une question simple</i>)
triste	sad, awful — quality (<i>une triste histoire</i>)	sad, unhappy — emotion (<i>une femme triste</i>)
véritable	real, genuine, emphatic (<i>un véritable miracle</i>)	true, authentic (<i>une histoire véritable</i>)
vilain	bad, awful (<i>un vilain mensonge</i>)	ugly (<i>un dessin vilain</i>)
vrai	real, actual (<i>un vrai problème</i>)	true, factual (<i>une histoire vraie</i>)

Part 2 — Compare & Contrast Cheat Sheet

Classic traps — minimal pairs

You want to say	Right	Wrong (and why)
A beautiful man	un bel homme	un beau homme — elision is required directly before a vowel-initial masculine noun.
Big houses (BAGS + plural)	de grandes maisons	des grandes maisons — des must shrink to de before a BAGS adjective + plural noun.
A great man (stature/character)	un grand homme	un homme grand — that means “a tall man” instead.
My former castle	mon ancien château	mon château ancien — that means “an old/ancient castle” instead.
An old, kind cat	un vieux et gentil chat	un vieil et gentil chat — vieil only appears before a vowel/mute-h noun; chat starts with a consonant, so vieux is correct even right before another adjective.
A young man (age, not stature)	un jeune homme	<i>un homme jeune</i> isn't wrong grammatically, but it's unnatural — jeune almost always precedes a person noun.

Quick decision guide

When an adjective could go either way, ask in this order:

1. **Is it one of the 30 meaning-shift words?** If yes, position changes the *meaning* — pick the side that matches what you're trying to say, not just “before is more common.” (Level 3)
2. **Is it a BAGS word** (beauty/age/goodness/size)? If yes and it's not doing meaning-shift work, it goes before the noun. (Level 2)
3. **Otherwise**, it goes after the noun — the default for the vast majority of French adjectives. (Level 2)
4. **Whatever position it lands in, it still has to agree** in gender and number with the noun. Position and agreement are graded independently — getting the order right doesn't excuse a wrong ending, and vice versa. (Level 1)

Ties to the rest of the site

Three words — **grand**, **jeune**, **nouveau** — sit at the exact intersection of BAGS and meaning-shift: on an ordinary object or place, they're simple BAGS placement (*une grande table* = “a big table,” *un nouvel appartement* = “a new apartment”). On a **person noun**, the same words become meaning-shift adjectives instead (*un grand homme* = “a great man” vs. *un homme grand* = “a tall man”). If a BAGS-drill sentence about a person with one of these three words feels like it's testing something deeper than word order, it is — that's Level 3's territory, not Level 2's.