

C'est vs Il/Elle Est — Grammar Capsule

Companion reference sheet for the C'est vs Il/Elle Est drill.

Part 1 — The Rule

C'est = identifying — this tells you what or who something is. **Il/Elle est** (or the plural **ils/elles sont**) = **describing** — this tells you what something is like. English collapses both into "it is / he is / she is," which is exactly why this pair is so easy to get wrong even after years of study: your English instinct gives you no signal at all for which French structure to reach for.

Why English misleads you

English professions and adjectives use the same pattern regardless of context: "he is a doctor," "he is smart," "it is difficult." French splits this into two grammatically distinct constructions depending on whether an article is present. There is no vocabulary distinction in English to hang the rule on — it is purely structural, which is why it has to be drilled as a reflex rather than reasoned out sentence by sentence.

Use c'est when:

Situation	Example
There's a noun with an article (un, une, le, la, mon...)	C'est un médecin. C'est mon ami. C'est la vérité.
Making a general comment on a situation or idea	C'est difficile. C'est important. C'est vrai.
A strong reaction / exclamation	C'est magnifique ! C'est terrible !

Use il/elle est (ils/elles sont) when:

Situation	Example
Just an adjective, no article	Il est intelligent. Elle est grande.
Profession, no article	Il est médecin. Elle est professeure.
Nationality or religion, no article	Elle est française. Il est catholique.
Describing a specific thing already named	Ce livre ? Il est intéressant.

The quick decision test

See an article (un, une, le, la, mon, ce...) sitting in front of the noun? -> c'est. Just a bare adjective or a bare profession with no article? -> il/elle est. Talking about a general situation, idea, or making a comment with no specific noun to point back to? -> c'est. Talking about a specific thing you already named a moment ago? -> il/elle est, agreeing in gender and number.

Memory-aid pattern

Think of *c'est* as a pointing finger: it always introduces or identifies something, and whatever follows behaves like a noun phrase (which is why an article shows up). Think of *il/elle est* as a plain description: whatever follows behaves like an adjective, even when it's technically a profession word — no article, because you're not introducing a new thing into the conversation, you're describing one that's already there (even if only implicitly, as with a profession).

Part 2 — Common Traps

The single most common fossilized error for English speakers: adding an article after *il/elle est*. An article can never directly follow *il/elle est* — if there's an article, the sentence needs *c'est* instead.

Wrong	Right	Why
Il est un docteur.	C'est un docteur. OR Il est docteur.	Article present = <i>c'est</i> (or drop the article)
Elle est une amie.	C'est une amie.	Article = <i>c'est</i>
C'est intéressant. (about a specific book already named)	Il est intéressant.	Specific thing already named = <i>il/elle est</i>
Il est un homme patient.	C'est un homme patient.	Article + noun = <i>c'est</i>
C'est vrai que... (as a fixed intro before a clause)	Il est vrai que...	Set expression exception — worth memorizing separately

Part 3 — Classic Minimal Pairs (Same Content, Different Framing)

These pairs share the same underlying content but shift meaning depending on which construction is used — notice how the *c'est* version identifies/points, while the *il/elle est* version describes.

C'est (identifying)	Il/Elle est (describing)
C'est un médecin. (that's who he is)	Il est médecin. (his profession)
C'est une étudiante intelligente. (identifying her)	Elle est intelligente. (describing her)
C'est difficile. (general observation)	Il est difficile. (this specific thing)
C'est une Française. (defining identity)	Elle est française. (describing nationality)
C'est important. (general comment)	Il est important. (this specific thing)
C'est le directeur. (identifying his role)	Il est directeur. (describing his function)
C'est un grand homme. (a great man)	Il est grand. (he's tall)
C'est une bonne idée. (identifying quality)	Elle est bonne, cette idée. (describing it)
C'est mon ami. (identifying relationship)	Il est gentil. (describing character)

Other ways to practice

- Whenever you catch yourself about to say "he/she/it is" in English, pause half a second and ask: am I about to name/introduce something (c'est), or describe something already on the table (il/elle est)?
- Read a French article or book and flag every c'est / il est / elle est you find — before checking, guess which rule triggered it.
- Reformulate any sentence you encounter using the other construction where grammatically possible (e.g. take "il est médecin" and try "c'est un médecin") to feel the meaning shift.
- Record yourself describing three people you know, once in a fast unscripted pass and once slowed down and self-corrected — count how many il est/c'est swaps you catch on the second pass.