

Direct vs. Indirect Object Triggers

Grammar Capsule & Compare-and-Contrast Cheat Sheet — companion to the drill

Part 1 — Grammar Capsule

The Core Test

Ignore the English translation entirely — it does not track this distinction reliably. The only test that works: take the verb in its plain, dictionary form and ask whether **à** sits directly before the person.

à is there -> the person is an **indirect object** -> replace with **lui** (one person) or **leur** (more than one).

téléphoner à quelqu'un -> il lui téléphone

No à -> the person is a **direct object** -> replace with **le / la** (one person) or **les** (more than one).

regarder quelqu'un -> il la regarde

There is no shortcut from the English verb to the French construction. This is memorized per verb, the same way noun gender is memorized — not derived from meaning.

Why English Actively Misleads You

English prepositions don't map onto this distinction at all, and sometimes point the opposite way from French:

English pattern	What you'd guess	What French actually does
"I call someone" (no preposition)	Looks direct	téléphoner à qqn -> indirect (<i>je lui téléphone</i>)
"I look at someone" (has "at")	Looks indirect	regarder qqn -> direct, no preposition at all (<i>je la regarde</i>)
"I steal something from someone"	"From" suggests separate/indirect-ish	voler qqch à qqn -> person is indirect (<i>je lui vole son sac</i>)
"I miss you" (you = direct object)	Looks direct	French flips the sentence: tu me manques — and the person is still indirect

Semantic Families — A Memory Aid, Not a Rule

Raw memorization of 60+ isolated facts is hard. It helps to notice that most (not all) of these verbs sort into two loose families. Treat this as a strong hint that narrows your guess, never as a guarantee — every family has exceptions, listed below each one.

Family A — Directed communication (skews indirect, lui/leur)

The action is a message travelling *toward* a person: parler à, dire à, écrire à, répondre à, téléphoner à, sourire à, promettre à, montrer à, envoyer à, donner à, demander à.

Family B — Action landing on a target (skews direct, le/la/les)

The person is the direct target of a physical, sensory, or practical action, no message travelling toward them: regarder, écouter, chercher, attendre, payer, appeler, aider, inviter, rencontrer, accompagner, voir, connaître.

Exceptions Worth Memorizing on Their Own (They Break the Families Above)

These verbs don't fit neatly into Family A or Family B — each is indirect (à -> lui/leur) for a reason that has nothing to do with communication-toward or action-on-target.

Verb	Meaning	Why it's an exception
obéir à / désobéir à	to obey / disobey (someone)	Obedying “lands on” someone in English, but is indirect in French.
plaire à	to please / be liked by (someone)	No obvious English preposition to guess from either way.
manquer à	to be missed by (someone)	Reversed subject in French (<i>tu me manques</i>), and still indirect on top of that.
appartenir à	to belong (to someone)	English “to” actually matches here, so this one's a freebie — worth noting anyway.
convenir à	to suit (someone)	No preposition signal in the English translation at all.
nuire à	to harm (someone)	“To harm someone” feels direct in English — it isn't in French.

Other Ways to Practice This Beyond the Drill

- Write 10 original sentences about people in your own life — 5 using lui/leur, 5 using le/la/les — instead of drilling isolated verbs.
- Pick a French news article or blog post and highlight every verb that takes a person as its object. Classify each one before checking a dictionary, then check your answers.
- When you come across a sentence using one of the à-verbs — in reading, media, or your own writing — pause and reformulate it, replacing the person with lui or leur out loud or on paper. Turning passive reading into active substitution practice cements the pattern faster than recognition alone.
- Describe someone you know out loud (or to a language partner) using five verbs from each family in one sitting, to force retrieval instead of recognition.
- Before answering in the drill, say the family test out loud first (“is this communication-toward, or action-on-target?”) — narrating the reasoning builds the habit faster than silent guessing.
- Revisit the drill's missed-item queue specifically after reviewing this cheat sheet, to test whether the review actually improved recall rather than just feeling like it did.

Part 2 — Compare & Contrast Cheat Sheet

Classic Minimal Pairs & Traps

These pairs are the ones most likely to actually trip you up, because the two verbs are close enough in meaning that your English instinct treats them as interchangeable. They are not.

Meaning	Indirect (à -> lui/leur)	Direct (le/la/les)
"to call someone"	téléphoner à qqn <i>il lui téléphone</i>	appeler qqn <i>il l'appelle</i>
"to trust / believe someone"	faire confiance à qqn <i>il lui fait confiance</i>	croire qqn <i>il la croit</i>
"to visit / meet someone"	rendre visite à qqn <i>il lui rend visite</i>	rencontrer qqn <i>il la rencontre</i>
"to ask / consult someone"	demander à qqn <i>il lui demande</i>	consulter qqn <i>il la consulte</i>

Bonus Traps: Same Verb Root, Different Construction for a Different Meaning

These aren't pairs of two different verbs — it's the *same* verb root doing something different depending on whether the object is a person or a thing. Easy to overlook, and easy to get wrong for exactly that reason.

Verb root	This pool's sense (a person)	Watch out — different sense (a thing)
croire	croire qqn — believe a person <i>il la croit</i> (direct)	croire à qqch — believe in a thing a different indirect construction
rendre visite / visiter	rendre visite à qqn — visit a person <i>il lui rend visite</i> (indirect)	visiter qqch — visit a place direct, no à at all
manquer	manquer à qqn — be missed by someone reversed subject, still indirect: <i>tu me manques</i>	manquer qqch — miss/lack a thing ordinary direct object, no à

Full Reference — Indirect Object Verbs, 30 verbs

Verb	Meaning	Example
téléphoner à	to phone/call (someone)	<i>Il lui téléphone.</i>
parler à	to talk/speak (to someone)	<i>Il lui parle.</i>
demander à	to ask (someone) [for something]	<i>Il lui demande.</i>
répondre à	to answer/reply (to someone)	<i>Il lui répond.</i>
obéir à	to obey (someone)	<i>Il lui obéit.</i>
désobéir à	to disobey (someone)	<i>Il lui désobéit.</i>

Verb	Meaning	Example
plaire à	to please / be liked by (someone)	<i>Il lui plaît.</i>
ressembler à	to resemble / look like (someone)	<i>Il lui ressemble.</i>
sourire à	to smile (at someone)	<i>Il lui sourit.</i>
manquer à	to be missed by (someone) — reversed subject	<i>Elle lui manque. (He misses her.)</i>
permettre à	to allow/permit (someone)	<i>Il lui permet de partir.</i>
promettre à	to promise (someone) [something]	<i>Il lui promet un cadeau.</i>
dire à	to tell/say (to someone)	<i>Il lui dit la vérité.</i>
donner à	to give (to someone)	<i>Il lui donne un livre.</i>
écrire à	to write (to someone)	<i>Il lui écrit une lettre.</i>
envoyer à	to send (to someone)	<i>Il lui envoie un colis.</i>
montrer à	to show (to someone)	<i>Il lui montre la photo.</i>
offrir à	to offer/give (to someone) [as a gift]	<i>Il lui offre des fleurs.</i>
prêter à	to lend (to someone)	<i>Il lui prête sa voiture.</i>
rendre visite à	to visit (someone)	<i>Il lui rend visite.</i>
pardonner à	to forgive (someone)	<i>Il lui pardonne.</i>
reprocher à	to reproach/blame (someone)	<i>Il lui reproche son retard.</i>
appartenir à	to belong (to someone)	<i>Ce livre lui appartient.</i>
convenir à	to suit (someone)	<i>Cette date lui convient.</i>
nuire à	to harm (someone)	<i>Ce climat lui nuit.</i>
suffire à	to be enough (for someone)	<i>Un mot lui suffit.</i>
faire confiance à	to trust (someone)	<i>Il lui fait confiance.</i>
interdire à	to forbid (someone)	<i>Il lui interdit de sortir.</i>
conseiller à	to advise (someone)	<i>Il lui conseille de partir.</i>
voler (qqch à qqn)	to steal (something) from (someone)	<i>Il lui vole son sac.</i>

Full Reference — Direct Object Verbs (le/la/les), 30 verbs

Verb	Meaning	Example
regarder	to look at (someone)	<i>Il la regarde.</i>
écouter	to listen to (someone)	<i>Il l'écoute.</i>
chercher	to look for (someone)	<i>Il la cherche.</i>
attendre	to wait for (someone)	<i>Il l'attend.</i>
payer	to pay (someone)	<i>Il la paie.</i>

Verb	Meaning	Example
appeler	to call (someone)	<i>Il l'appelle.</i>
aider	to help (someone)	<i>Il l'aide.</i>
inviter	to invite (someone)	<i>Il l'invite.</i>
rencontrer	to meet (someone)	<i>Il la rencontre.</i>
accompagner	to accompany / go with (someone)	<i>Il l'accompagne.</i>
croire	to believe (someone)	<i>Il la croit.</i>
connaître	to know (someone)	<i>Il la connaît.</i>
voir	to see (someone)	<i>Il la voit.</i>
remercier	to thank (someone)	<i>Il la remercie.</i>
saluer	to greet (someone)	<i>Il la salue.</i>
suivre	to follow (someone)	<i>Il la suit.</i>
contacter	to contact (someone)	<i>Il la contacte.</i>
embrasser	to kiss / hug (someone)	<i>Il l'embrasse.</i>
applaudir	to applaud (someone)	<i>Il l'applaudit.</i>
consulter	to consult (someone)	<i>Il la consulte.</i>
féliciter	to congratulate (someone)	<i>Il la félicite.</i>
punir	to punish (someone)	<i>Il la punit.</i>
admirer	to admire (someone)	<i>Il l'admire.</i>
épouser	to marry (someone)	<i>Il l'épouse.</i>
oublier	to forget (someone)	<i>Il l'oublie.</i>
quitter	to leave (someone)	<i>Il la quitte.</i>
reconnaître	to recognize (someone)	<i>Il la reconnaît.</i>
soutenir	to support (someone)	<i>Il la soutient.</i>
surveiller	to watch over / supervise (someone)	<i>Il la surveille.</i>
tromper	to cheat on / deceive (someone)	<i>Il la trompe.</i>

Companion reference sheet for the **Direct vs. Indirect Object Triggers** drill.