

Reflexive & Pronominal Verbs — Grammar Capsule

Companion for the Reflexive & Pronominal Verbs drill (Levels 1-5). One question decides agreement for every position: the Spotlight Principle framework, worked all the way through.

Part 1 — The Rule

French uses one small word, **se**, to do five genuinely different jobs: turning the action back onto the subject (*elle se lave*, she washes herself), splitting it between two subjects acting on each other (*ils se voient*, they see each other), keeping the subject as the beneficiary of an action done to something else (*elle s'achete une robe*, she buys herself a dress), removing the agent entirely so the subject reads like it's on the receiving end (*ce modèle se vend bien*, this model sells well), or carrying no separable meaning at all because the verb simply doesn't exist without **se** (*se souvenir*, to remember). Which job **se** is doing on a given sentence is what decides whether the past participle agrees with the subject in compound tenses.

Why English misleads you

English has one reflexive tool — "-self" — and reaches for it only in the narrowest of these five jobs ("she washed herself"). The other four jobs get translated with completely different English machinery: "each other" for reciprocals, "for herself" or nothing at all for the beneficiary use, a passive construction ("is sold") for the agent-removed use, and an ordinary-looking verb for the idiomatic ones ("remember," not "self-remember"). Nothing in English primes you to notice these are the same French mechanism wearing five different meanings, and nothing in English signals agreement either, because English past participles never agree with anything ("washed" stays "washed" no matter who did the washing). Both the classification and the agreement have to become new reflexes — there is no English habit to lean on for either one.

The Spotlight Principle — five positions

#	Name	What happens	Agreement	Example
1	Loop Back	Spotlight turns back on the subject — true reflexive	Agrees, unless a body part/object follows	Elle s'est lavée vs. Elle s'est lavé les mains
2	Share It	Spotlight splits between two subjects acting on each other — reciprocal	Agrees only if the base verb takes a direct object	Ils se sont vus vs. Elles se sont téléphoné
3	Doer as Beneficiary	Subject gains from the action; the real direct object always follows the verb	Never agrees	Il s'est acheté une montre (not achetée)
4	Remove the Agent	Subject is what would be the direct object in an active sentence — passive/middle	Always agrees	Ce modèle s'est vendu à 10 000 exemplaires
5	Baked In	Se has no independent function — it's part of the verb's identity	Agrees by default (4 named exceptions never agree)	Elle s'est souvenue... vs. Elle s'est rendu compte de...

The One Agreement Question — 6-step decision path

Where is the direct object — and does it precede the verb? If yes, agree with it. If no, don't.

#	Ask	Result
1	Body part or external object follows the verb?	No agreement
2	Base verb takes à/de (essentially indirect)?	No agreement
3	Se faire + infinitif?	<i>fait</i> invariable — no agreement
4	External direct object benefits the subject (Position 3)?	No agreement
5	Se/me/te/nous/vous is the direct object of the action?	Agree
6	Position 4 — inanimate subject, passive/middle?	Agree with the subject

Three attested traps: *Elle s'est lavé les mains* (not lavée — body part blocks it), *Ils se sont téléphoné* (never agrees — téléphoner à), *Elle s'est acheté une robe* (never agrees — Position 3, external object). Four Position 5 verbs never agree despite looking "baked in": **se demander, se rendre compte de, s'imaginer, se plaire**.

Part 2 — Compare & Contrast Cheat Sheet

Passe compose vs. plus-que-parfait — reading the sequence

The tell isn't a keyword like *déjà* — it's whether the sentence sets up **two** past moments (plus-que-parfait for whichever happened first) or just **one** (passé composé). Real usage isn't limited to a single "Quand...", cue; the patterns below show up just as often.

Pattern	What it marks	Example
Quand + [passé composé clause],...	Two past events in sequence — the blank is the earlier one	Quand les invités sont arrivés, je ____ -> <i>m'étais déjà lavé(e)</i>
[Consequence], <i>parce que</i> ...	The blank explains why a later situation was true	Il n'a pas répondu, parce qu'il ____ -> <i>s'était déjà couché</i>
Two sentences, no "quand" — a reference moment, then an earlier one (<i>la veille, quelques jours plus tôt...</i>)	Comparing two past moments side by side, not nested in one clause	Elle est allée au marché ce jour-là. La veille, elle ____ -> <i>avait déjà préparé une liste</i>
[Subject] a dit / a expliqué / a raconté <i>que</i> ...	Reported speech — someone recounting what had already happened	Il a expliqué qu'il ____ -> <i>s'était trompé de train</i>
A single time marker, no "Quand" clause (<i>hier soir, ce matin-là, après le match...</i>)	One completed past event, nothing to sequence against	Hier soir, je ____ -> <i>me suis lavé(e)</i>
No time marker at all before the subject	Still a single narrated event — default to passé composé	Ce modèle ____ très bien depuis la baisse des prix -> <i>s'est vendu</i>

A fifth real trigger — *si + plus-que-parfait for past hypotheticals (Si j'avais su...)* — belongs to a conditional-mood structure, not a tense-sequencing one, so it sits outside this table and outside this drill.

Verbs that change meaning with se

Category	Non-pronominal	Pronominal
Physical action	lever, laver, réveiller, coucher	se lever, se laver, se réveiller, se coucher
Cognitive/perceptual	apercevoir, demander, attendre, douter de	s'apercevoir de, se demander, s'attendre à, se douter de
Emotional/state-change	fâcher, énerver, calmer, impatienter	se fâcher, s'énervé, se calmer, s'impatienter
Social/moral	tromper, plaindre, accorder, permettre	se tromper, se plaindre de, s'accorder, se permettre
Beneficiary/causative	offrir, acheter, faire couper, voir, rendre compte de	s'offrir, s'acheter, se faire couper, se voir + inf., se rendre compte de

Classic traps — minimal pairs

You want to say	Right	Wrong (and why)
She washed her hands.	Elle s'est lavé les mains.	Elle s'est lavée les mains — a body part follows the verb, so agreement is blocked (Position 1 trap).
They saw each other.	Ils se sont vus.	Ils se sont vu — reciprocal with a genuine direct object agrees (Position 2).
They phoned each other.	Elles se sont téléphoné.	Elles se sont téléphonées — téléphoner à is indirect, so it never agrees (Position 2 trap).
She bought herself a watch.	Elle s'est acheté une montre.	Elle s'est achetée une montre — the watch is the real object; the subject only benefits (Position 3, never agrees).
This house sold quickly.	Cette maison s'est vendue rapidement.	Cette maison s'est vendu rapidement — unlike Position 3, Position 4 always agrees with an inanimate subject.
She realized her mistake.	Elle s'est rendu compte de son erreur.	Elle s'est rendue compte de son erreur — se rendre compte de is a named exception; it never agrees.
She remembered the address.	Elle s'est souvenue de l'adresse.	Elle s'est souvenu de l'adresse — an ordinary Position 5 verb, unlike se rendre compte de above, so it agrees by default.