

Subjonctif Passé — Formation & Recognition

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

Part 1 — Grammar Capsule

The Core Test

The subjunctive is triggered by a specific, closed list of constructions in the main clause, linked to an embedded clause by *que* — not by "the sentence feeling subjunctive," which is the instinct that gets learners in trouble. If the main clause expresses desire (*vouloir que*), necessity (*il faut que*), emotion (*être content(e) que*, *avoir peur que*), doubt (*douter que*, *il est possible que*), or is one of a fixed set of subordinating conjunctions (*bien que*, *pour que*, *avant que...*), the embedded clause takes the subjunctive. Plain statements of fact, most assertion verbs, and "certainty" verbs like *penser*, *croire*, *trouver* in the affirmative take the indicative instead.

Nothing about this recognition rule changes when the embedded action moves into the past — the same triggers govern both tenses. What changes is only the form of the embedded verb, which is what the rest of this capsule covers.

Trigger Families — A Memory Aid, Not a Rule

- **PUSH — desire/volition (subjunctive):** *vouloir que*, *souhaiter que*, *désirer que*, *préférer que*, *proposer que*, *accepter que*, *suggérer que*. The main-clause subject wanted the embedded-clause subject to have done something.
- **PULL — necessity/obligation (subjunctive):** *il faut que*, *il est nécessaire que*, *il est important que*, *il est urgent que*, *il vaut mieux que*, *exiger que*, *demander que*, *il est temps que*. Something needed to have happened.
- **LIFT — positive emotion (subjunctive):** *être content(e)/heureux(se) que*, *être ravi(e) que*, *être fier/fière que*, *être surpris(e) que*, *se réjouir que*.
- **DROP — negative emotion (subjunctive):** *avoir peur que*, *craindre que*, *regretter que*, *être triste/désolé(e) que*, *c'est dommage que*.
- **FOG — doubt/uncertainty (subjunctive):** *douter que*, *il est possible que*, *il est peu probable que*, *il se peut que*, *il semble que*, *ne pas croire/penser que*.
- **GLASS — certainty (indicative):** *penser/croire/trouver que* (affirmative), *savoir que*, *être sûr(e) que*.
- **CONJ — connectors (mixed, memorize individually):** most take the subjunctive (*bien que*, *pour que*, *avant que*, *sans que*, *pourvu que*), but *après que* stays indicative — describing a real, completed sequence rather than a hypothetical link.

Why English Misleads You

English barely marks the subjunctive at all, so learners default to translating *tone* rather than structure: "if it sounds emotional or opinion-based, use the subjunctive." That heuristic fails on exactly the triggers that matter most — now that you've seen the categories above, here's where tone and category pull apart.

English pattern	What you'd guess	What French actually does
"I think that (he left)..."	Sounds like an opinion → subjunctive?	Indicative. <i>Penser/croire que</i> (affirmative) is GLASS, not FOG.
"I hope that (she arrived)..."	Sounds hopeful and subjective → subjunctive?	Indicative. <i>Espérer que</i> is a memorized exception.
"It's probable that (they came)..."	Sounds uncertain → subjunctive?	Indicative. <i>Il est probable que</i> reads as near-certain in French register.
"I doubt that (he finished)..."	Uncertain → subjunctive?	Subjunctive — <i>douter que</i> genuinely is FOG.
"I don't think that (it rained)..."	Just a negated opinion	Subjunctive — negating a GLASS verb flips it into FOG territory.

Check the category first; treat English tone as a distraction. It will fool you precisely on *espérer*, *il est probable que*, and negated GLASS verbs.

Exceptions Worth Memorizing

Trigger	Meaning	Why it's an exception
<i>espérer que</i>	to hope that	Indicative, despite sounding emotionally loaded. The most commonly missed trigger, present or past.
<i>il est probable que</i>	it's probable that	Indicative — treated as near-certain. Negated (<i>il est peu probable que</i>), it flips to subjunctive.
<i>après que</i>	after	Indicative in both tenses — describes a completed, real event, unlike <i>avant que</i> (subjunctive).

Other Ways to Practice This Beyond the Drill

- Write five original past-tense sentences per session, drawing from triggers outside the drill's own item bank.
- Take five sentences you've already mastered in the present subjunctive and rewrite them in the past — the trigger and mood logic transfer directly; only the embedded verb form changes.
- Narrate your auxiliary choice out loud before answering: "*se souvenir*, reflexive, so *être*, so *je me sois souvenu(e)*." Naming the rule cements it faster than guessing from the sound of the sentence.

- Revisit your missed-items queue a day later rather than immediately — spaced retrieval beats same-session repetition.

Part 2 — Formation: Auxiliary Choice and Agreement

Avoir or Être? Same Rule as Any Compound Past Tense

The past subjunctive is built from the *present subjunctive* of the auxiliary (*avoir* or *être*) plus the past participle — the auxiliary choice follows the exact same rule as the *passé composé*. Most verbs use *avoir*. The Vandertramp verbs (**D**evenir, **R**evenir, **M**onter, **R**ester, **S**ortir, **P**artir, **A**rriver, **N**âître, **D**escendre, **E**ntre(r), **R**entre(r), **T**omber, **R**etourner, **M**ourir, **V**enir — plus their compounds) and every reflexive/pronominal verb use *être*.

*que j'**aie** mangé (avoir — regular) que je **sois** parti(e) (être — Vandertramp) que tu te **sois** souvenu(e) (être — reflexive)*

Agreement Rules

- **Avoir verbs:** the past participle does not agree with the subject. *Que tu aies fini* stays *fini* whether the subject is masculine, feminine, singular, or plural.
- **Être verbs (Vandertramp):** the participle agrees with the subject in gender and number. *Que tu sois parti* (masculine) / *que tu sois partie* (feminine) / *que vous soyez partis* (masculine plural or mixed group).
- **Reflexive/pronominal être verbs:** the participle agrees with the reflexive pronoun, which normally matches the subject — *que nous nous soyons habillé(e)s*. The one trap worth flagging: if a direct object follows the reflexive verb, agreement can break (*elle s'est lavé les mains* — no agreement, because *les mains* is the direct object, not the reflexive pronoun). This drill's items keep that edge case out of scope, but it's worth knowing it exists before you hit it in the wild.

Elision Reminders

Que elides to *qu'* before a vowel-initial subject: *qu'il*, *qu'elle*, *qu'on*, *qu'ils*, *qu'elles* — never *que il*. This applies identically to present and past subjunctive; only the verb after the subject changes.

Présent vs. Passé du Subjonctif — When Native Speakers Actually Choose

The choice isn't about which trigger you used — every trigger that takes the subjunctive can take either tense. It's about whether the embedded action happened *before* the moment framed by the main clause, or *at/after* it.

Context	Présent du subjonctif	Passé du subjonctif
Doubt about something still pending or ongoing	<i>Je doute qu'il vienne.</i> (I doubt he's coming / will come.)	—
Doubt about something already finished	—	<i>Je doute qu'il soit venu.</i> (I doubt he came.)
Happiness about a present/future state	<i>Je suis content(e) qu'elle soit là.</i> (...that she's here.)	—
Happiness about a completed event	—	<i>Je suis content(e) qu'elle soit arrivée.</i> (...that she arrived.)

Rule of thumb: if you could insert "already" or "by then" into the English without changing the meaning, reach for the passé du subjonctif.

Part 3 — Compare-and-Contrast Cheat Sheet

Présent vs. Passé du Subjonctif Minimal Pairs

Meaning shift	Présent du subjonctif	Passé du subjonctif
Ongoing/future doubt vs. past doubt	<i>je doute qu'il vienne</i>	<i>je doute qu'il soit venu</i>
Present-state emotion vs. completed-event emotion	<i>je suis content(e) qu'elle soit là</i>	<i>je suis content(e) qu'elle soit arrivée</i>
Necessity not yet met vs. necessity already met	<i>il faut que tu finisses</i>	<i>il faut que tu aies fini</i>
Ongoing concession vs. completed concession	<i>bien qu'il soit fatigué</i>	<i>bien qu'il ait beaucoup travaillé</i>

Full Trigger Reference, by Category

(Same recognition list as the present-tense page — the mood assignment per trigger doesn't change between tenses, only the embedded verb form does.)

Split into two blocks by mood first, category second — so every subjunctive trigger is in one place and every indicative trigger is in another, with nothing mixed within a single table. (Same recognition list as the present-tense page — the mood assignment per trigger doesn't change between tenses, only the embedded verb form does.)

Subjunctive Triggers

PUSH — desire/volition

Trigger	English
vouloir que	to want that
souhaiter que	to wish that
désirer que	to desire that
préférer que	to prefer that
proposer que	to propose that
accepter que	to accept that
suggérer que	to suggest that

PULL — necessity/obligation

Trigger	English
il faut que	it's necessary that / must
il est nécessaire que	it's necessary that
il est important que	it's important that
il est urgent que	it's urgent that
il vaut mieux que	it's better that
il est temps que	it's time that
exiger que	to demand that
demander que	to ask/request that

LIFT — positive emotion

Trigger	English
être content(e) / heureux(se) que	to be happy that
être ravi(e) que	to be delighted that
être fier / fière que	to be proud that
être surpris(e) que	to be surprised that
se réjouir que	to rejoice / be delighted that

DROP — negative emotion

Trigger	English
avoir peur que	to be afraid that
craindre que	to fear that
regretter que	to regret that
être triste / désolé(e) que	to be sad/sorry that
c'est dommage que	it's a shame that

FOG — doubt/uncertainty

Trigger	English
douter que	to doubt that
il est possible que	it's possible that
il est peu probable que	it's unlikely that
il se peut que	it may be that
il semble que (impersonal)	it seems that
ne pas croire que	to not believe that
ne pas penser que	to not think that

CONJ — connectors that take the subjunctive

Trigger	English
bien que / quoique	although
pour que / afin que	so that
avant que	before
sans que	without
pourvu que	provided that

Indicative Triggers

GLASS — certainty

Trigger	English
penser que (affirmative)	to think that
croire que (affirmative)	to believe that
savoir que	to know that
être sûr(e) que	to be sure that

CONJ — connectors that take the indicative

Trigger	English
après que	after

EXCEPTION — sound subjunctive, aren't

Trigger	English
espérer que	to hope that
il est probable que	it's probable that

Companion reference sheet for the Subjonctif Passé trigger drill.