

Subjonctif Présent — Trigger Recognition

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

Part 1 — Grammar Capsule

The Core Test

The subjunctive isn't triggered by "the sentence feels subjective" — that instinct is exactly what gets learners in trouble. It's triggered by a specific, closed list of constructions in the main clause, linked to an embedded clause by *que*. 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.

There's no shortcut around learning which bucket a trigger falls into. But the buckets themselves are learnable — that's what the categories on this page (PUSH, PULL, LIFT, DROP, FOG, GLASS, CONJ, ASSERTION) are for, and what this capsule walks through.

Trigger Families — A Memory Aid, Not a Rule

These groupings make the list learnable, but treat them as a strong hint, not a guarantee — the Exceptions table below lists the triggers that break the pattern.

- **PUSH — desire/volition (subjunctive):** *vouloir que*, *souhaiter que*, *désirer que*, *préférer que*, *aimer (mieux) que*, *proposer que*, *accepter que*, *suggérer que*. The main-clause subject wants the embedded-clause subject to do something; two different people, one desire.
- **PULL — necessity/obligation (subjunctive):** *il faut que*, *il est nécessaire que*, *il est important que*, *il est essentiel que*, *il est urgent que*, *il vaut mieux que*, *exiger que*, *demander que*, *ordonner que*, *permettre que*, *empêcher que*, *recommander que*, *s'attendre à ce que*, *il est temps que*, *il est utile que*. Impersonal or personal obligation — something *needs* to happen.
- **LIFT — positive emotion (subjunctive):** *être content(e)/heureux(se) que*, *être ravi(e) que*, *être fier/fière que*, *être surpris(e)/étonné(e) que*, *se réjouir que*, *apprécier que*, *c'est bien/formidable que*, *il est bon que*, *il est normal que*.
- **DROP — negative emotion (subjunctive):** *avoir peur que*, *craindre que*, *regretter que*, *être triste/désolé(e) que*, *être déçu(e) que*, *être furieux(se) que*, *déplorer que*, *détester que*, *c'est dommage que*.
- **FOG — doubt/uncertainty (subjunctive):** *douter que*, *il est possible que*, *il est impossible que*, *il est peu probable que*, *il se peut que*, *il semble que (impersonal)*, *ne pas croire que*, *ne pas penser que*.

- **GLASS — certainty (indicative):** *penser/croire/trouver que* (affirmative), *savoir que, être sûr(e)/certain(e) que, il est clair/évident/vrai que, il me semble que*. "Glass" because these are transparent, plain-fact statements — nothing to negotiate.
- **ASSERTION — plain statement (indicative):** *dire que, affirmer que, confirmer que, constater que, remarquer que, voir que, il paraît que*. Reporting or observing a fact, not judging it.
- **CONJ — connectors (mixed, memorize individually):** most take the subjunctive (*bien que/quoique, pour que/afin que, avant que, sans que, à moins que, à condition que, pourvu que, de crainte que, de peur que, en attendant que*), but four common ones don't (*après que, parce que, pendant que, puisque* — all indicative, because they describe real, factual time/causation rather than a hypothetical link).

Why English Misleads You

English barely marks the subjunctive ("I suggest that he go" is about as far as it gets, and most speakers don't produce that form anymore). Because English gives almost no signal, learners default to translating *tone* instead of *structure*: "if it sounds emotional or opinion-based, use the subjunctive." That heuristic fails on exactly the triggers that matter most — and 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..."	Sounds like an opinion → subjunctive?	Indicative. <i>Penser/croire que</i> (affirmative) is GLASS, not FOG.
"I hope that..."	Sounds hopeful and subjective → subjunctive?	Indicative. <i>Espérer que</i> is a memorized exception.
"It's probable that..."	Sounds uncertain → subjunctive?	Indicative. <i>Il est probable que</i> reads as near-certain in French register.
"I'm not sure that..."	Sounds uncertain → subjunctive?	Subjunctive — this one actually is FOG.
"I don't think that..."	Just a negated opinion	Subjunctive — negating a GLASS verb flips it into FOG territory.

The rule of thumb: check the category first, and treat English tone as a distraction rather than a guide. It will fool you precisely on *espérer, il est probable que*, and negated GLASS verbs — memorize those three traps and you've closed the biggest gap.

Exceptions Worth Memorizing

Trigger	Meaning	Why it's an exception
<i>espérer que</i>	to hope that	Indicative, despite sounding as emotionally loaded as <i>souhaiter que</i> (subjunctive). The single most commonly missed trigger.
<i>il est probable que</i>	it's probable that	Indicative — treated as near-certain. Its negation, <i>il est peu probable que</i> , flips to FOG/subjunctive.
<i>se douter que</i>	to suspect (strongly) that	Indicative! A different verb from <i>douter que</i> (to doubt, FOG, subjunctive) — same root, opposite mood, classic trap.
<i>après que</i>	after	Indicative — describes a completed, real sequence of events, unlike <i>avant que</i> (subjunctive), which frames an event that hasn't happened yet relative to the main clause.
<i>ne pas croire/ penser que</i>	to not believe/ think that	Subjunctive — negating GLASS verbs pushes them into FOG. The affirmative form stays indicative.

Other Ways to Practice This Beyond the Drill

- Write five original sentences per session, one from each category (PUSH, PULL, LIFT, DROP, FOG), instead of only recycling the drill's own item bank.
- Annotate a page of real French reading — a news article, a novel excerpt — and circle every *que*-clause, labeling mood and category before you check yourself.
- Narrate your reasoning out loud before answering in the drill: "this is *douter que*, so FOG, so subjunctive." Naming the rule out loud cements the mapping faster than pattern-matching from memory alone.
- Revisit your missed-items queue a day later rather than immediately — spaced retrieval beats same-session repetition for this kind of category learning.

Part 2 — Compare-and-Contrast Cheat Sheet

Classic Minimal Pairs & Traps

Meaning shift	Indicative construction	Subjunctive construction
Believing vs. doubting	<i>je pense que</i> + indicative	<i>je ne pense pas que</i> + subjunctive
Doubting vs. suspecting	<i>je me doute que</i> + indicative	<i>je doute que</i> + subjunctive
Plain probability vs. unlikely	<i>il est probable que</i> + indicative	<i>il est peu probable que</i> + subjunctive
Hoping vs. wishing	<i>j'espère que</i> + indicative	<i>je souhaite que</i> + subjunctive
Real past sequence vs. anticipated event	<i>après que</i> + indicative	<i>avant que</i> + subjunctive

Full Trigger Reference, by Category

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.

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
aimer (mieux) 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 essentiel que	it's essential 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
il est utile que	it's useful that
exiger que	to demand that
demander que	to ask/request that
ordonner que	to order that
permettre que	to permit/allow that
empêcher que	to prevent that
recommander que	to recommend that
s'attendre à ce que	to expect 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) / étonné(e) que	to be surprised that
se réjouir que	to rejoice / be delighted that
apprécier que	to appreciate that
c'est bien / formidable que	it's great that
il est bon que	it's good that
il est normal que	it's normal 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
être déçu(e) que	to be disappointed that
être furieux(se) que	to be furious that
déplorer que	to deplore that
détester que	to hate 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 impossible que	it's impossible 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
à moins que	unless
à condition que	provided that
pourvu que	provided that
de crainte que	for fear that
de peur que	for fear that
en attendant que	while waiting for

Indicative Triggers

GLASS — certainty

Trigger	English
penser que (affirmative)	to think that
croire que (affirmative)	to believe that
trouver que	to find / think that
savoir que	to know that
être sûr(e) que	to be sure that
être certain que	to be certain that
il est clair / évident que	it's clear/obvious that
il est vrai que	it's true that
il me semble que	it seems to me that

ASSERTION — plain statement

Trigger	English
dire que	to say that
affirmer que	to claim/assert that
confirmer que	to confirm that
constater que	to note/observe that
remarquer que	to notice that
voir que	to see that
il paraît que	it appears / it's said that

CONJ — connectors that take the indicative

Trigger	English
après que	after
parce que	because
pendant que	while
puisque	since

EXCEPTION / BORDERLINE — 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 Présent trigger drill.