

Vandertramp & the Être Family — Grammar Capsule

Shared companion for all five Vandertramp drills: Verb Review, Passé Composé, Plus-Que-Parfait, Futur Antérieur, and Conditionnel Passé. One rule powers the whole series.

Part 1 — The Rule

A small family of verbs — mostly verbs of movement or change of state — form ALL their compound tenses with **être** instead of **avoir**, and their past participle **agrees with the subject** like an adjective: *elle est allée*, *nous étions partis*, *elles seront venues*. The classic mnemonic DR & MRS VANDERTRAMP collects the 17 verbs this site drills (full table in Part 2).

Why English misleads you

English builds every perfect tense with one auxiliary: *have*. "She has left," "she had left," "she will have left" — always *have*. Nothing in your English instinct signals that *partir* needs a different auxiliary than *parler*, and nothing signals agreement, because English participles never agree with anything. Both decisions have to become reflexes, which is what the drills are for.

One rule, four tenses

Each Vandertramp drill page is the same rule wearing a different auxiliary tense. If you can produce one row of this table, you already understand all four pages — the drills just make each one automatic:

Tense	Auxiliary form	Example	English
Passé composé	présent of être	elle est partie	she left / has left
Plus-que-parfait	imparfait of être	elle était partie	she had left
Futur antérieur	futur of être	elle sera partie	she will have left
Conditionnel passé	conditionnel of être	elle serait partie	she would have left

Agreement

The participle takes -e for a feminine subject, -s for plural, -es for feminine plural: *il est parti*, *elle est partie*, *ils sont partis*, *elles sont parties*. Two traps: **vous** agrees with who it refers to — one person addressed formally gets a singular participle (*vous êtes parti(e)*, not *partis*) — and **on** meaning "we" commonly takes plural agreement in informal writing (*on est partis*).

The avoir exception — the single most valuable thing on this sheet

Six of the 17 can take a direct object: **monter**, **descendre**, **sortir**, **rentrer**, **retourner**, **passer**. Used that way, they switch to **avoir** and the participle stops agreeing with the subject. The meaning shifts from moving yourself to moving (or spending, or flipping) something:

With être (no object)	With avoir (direct object)
Elle est sortie . — She went out.	Elle a sorti la poubelle. — She took out the garbage.
Elle est montée . — She went up.	Elle a monté les valises. — She carried the suitcases up.
Elle est descendue . — She went down.	Elle a descendu l'escalier en courant. — She ran down the stairs.

With être (no object)	With avoir (direct object)
Elle est passée nous voir. — She came by.	Elle a passé un examen. — She took an exam.
Elle est retournée à Québec. — She went back.	Elle a retourné la crêpe. — She flipped the crêpe.
Elle est rentrée tard. — She got home late.	Elle a rentré la voiture au garage. — She put the car in.

Derivatives ride along

Prefixed forms of the 17 keep être: **devenir, redevenir, revenir, parvenir, repartir, remonter, redescendre, ressortir**... If the base verb is in the family, its derivative is too.

The border zone — the paraître group and demeurer

This is where the tidy list gets honest. A few verbs sit on the être/avoir border, and which auxiliary you hear depends on meaning, register — and where you are in the francophonie. Guidance below follows the OQLF's *Banque de dépannage linguistique* (BDL), the reference this site links for Canadian usage.

Verb	Standard modern usage	The nuance
apparaître	Almost always être : <i>le problème est apparu hier</i> .	Avoir is possible in principle (action focus) but rare in practice.
disparaître	Avoir dominates in France: <i>les clés ont disparu</i> . Être remains fully correct and is still widespread in Québec : <i>l'argent était disparu</i> .	A 17th-century usage brought to New France that Québec kept while France drifted to avoir. The BDL is explicit: être is not a fault — it stresses the accomplished result, "une nuance qui enrichit la langue." Expect to hear it in Canada; expect it to sound literary in France.
paraître = seem	Always avoir : <i>elle a paru surprise</i> .	No choice to make in this meaning.
paraître = be published	Être or avoir : <i>son roman est paru / a paru en mai</i> .	Être stresses the result (the book is now out); avoir the event.
demeurer = remain (in a state)	Être : <i>elle est demeurée silencieuse</i> .	State/result reading.
demeurer = reside	Avoir : <i>elle a demeuré à Québec dix ans</i> .	Action/duration reading — and note "demeurer" for reside is itself alive in Québec.

Other ways to practice beyond the drills

Narrate your own day in past tenses — arrivals, departures, and errands force the être family constantly. Reading autobiographical French (memoirs, personal essays) bathes you in these forms. When you write, the site's Writing Practice Prompts and the BonPatron checker (linked on the About page) will both surface auxiliary and agreement slips in your own sentences.

Part 2 — Compare & Contrast Cheat Sheet

The 17: DR & MRS VANDERTRAMP (+ Passer)

	Verb	Participle	English		Verb	Participle	English
D	devenir	devenu	to become	E	entrer	entré	to enter
R	revenir	revenu	to come back	R	rentrer	rentré	to go back in / return home
M	monter	monté	to go up / climb	T	tomber	tombé	to fall
R	rester	resté	to stay	R	retourner	retourné	to return / go back
S	sortir	sorti	to go out	A	arriver	arrivé	to arrive
V	venir	venu	to come	M	mourir	mort	to die
A	aller	allé	to go	P	partir	parti	to leave
N	naître	né	to be born	P	passer (par)	passé	to pass by
D	descendre	descendu	to go down				

Classic traps — minimal pairs

You want to say	Right	Wrong (and why)
She went out last night.	Elle est sortie hier soir.	Elle a sorti hier soir — no direct object, so être.
She took out the trash.	Elle a sorti la poubelle.	Elle est sortie la poubelle — direct object forces avoir.
She took an exam.	Elle a passé un examen.	Elle est passée un examen — object = avoir, no agreement.
You (formal, one woman) arrived early.	Vous êtes arrivée tôt.	Vous êtes arrivés tôt — vous is one person here; singular agreement.
The keys disappeared. (France)	Les clés ont disparu .	Être would sound literary in France...
The keys disappeared. (Québec)	Les clés ont disparu / sont disparues .	...but both are normal in Québec, and the BDL backs être.
She seemed tired.	Elle a paru fatiguée.	Elle est parue fatiguée — paraître = seem always takes avoir.
Her novel came out in May.	Son roman est paru / a paru en mai.	Both correct; être is the more common choice for publication.

Source for the border-zone guidance: OQLF, Banque de dépannage linguistique (vitrinelinguistique.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca) — articles on the auxiliaries of apparaître, disparaître, and paraître.