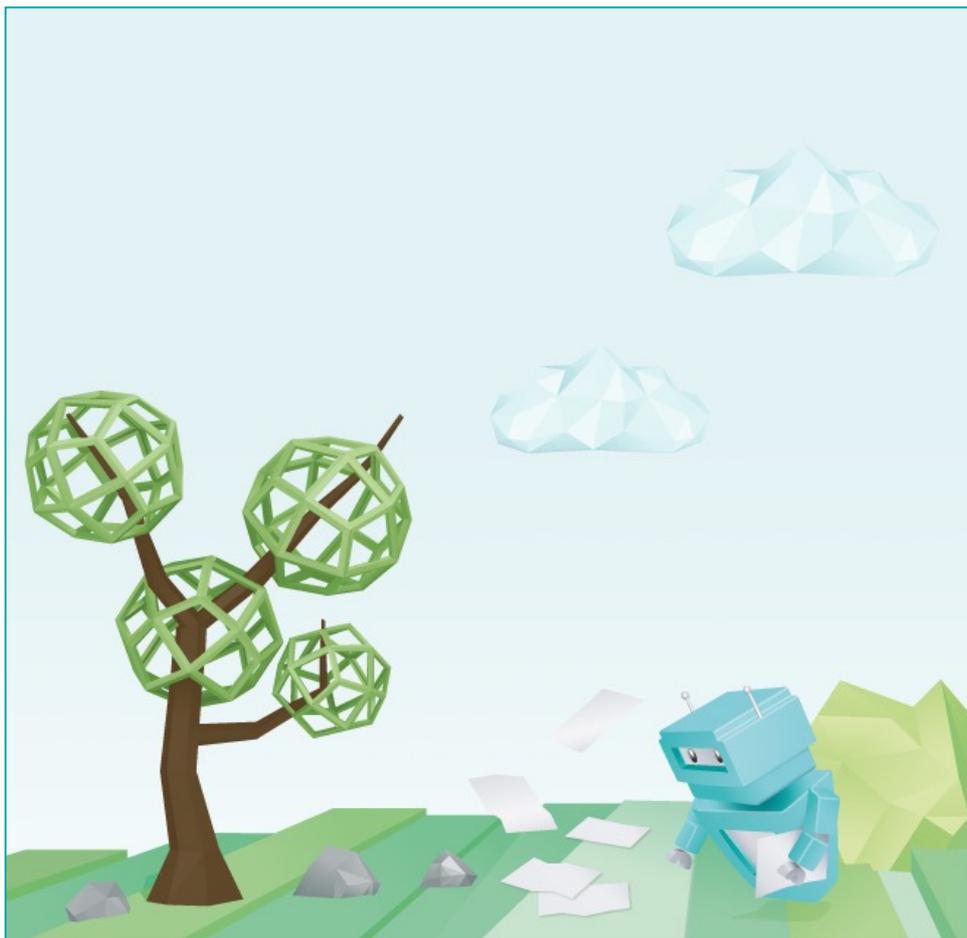


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# French

How to get a H1 in the Leaving Cert  
French Exam



by Eimear

*Eimear got a H1 in the higher French paper and is now doing Applied Languages at University of Limerick. Here she shares what she learned.*

French is a subject that many people struggle with for the Leaving Cert. I think a lot of people find it hard to get a grasp on a foreign language, which is very understandable due to the new words, new grammar, new rules, etc. Hopefully, this guide will make your life a little easier when studying French and help you become more prepared for the exam, come June.

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## The Oral Exam (L'épreuve Orale)

The oral exam is worth 25% of your overall mark and is marked out of 100.

- If you're anything like me, the idea of speaking this unusual, quite unfamiliar language to an expert in the language is quite daunting, but they're not there to intimidate you, and everyone gets through it in the end! Remember that, **you're not the first and you won't be the last student to feel nervous about an exam**, you're not alone and you WILL be OK.
- The exam begins when the examiner calls you in and starts the tape. When you walk in, I would recommend greeting the examiner by saying something like 'Bonjour Madame/Monsieur, comment allez-vous?'. They will appreciate kindness and respect.
- They will generally start off by asking some simple questions about you, your family, where you live, etc., quite like in the Irish oral. **Have your answers for this prepared and learned off if you can because they are easy marks to get.**
- From there, the examiner the examiner will have a normal conversation with you about a range of basic and general topics; school, your pass times, your friends, your plans for next year, etc. Sometimes, depending on how they judge your capability, they can lead on to a harder subject such as alcohol, drugs or politics. Don't freak out if this happens, it's their way of seeing if you're as good as they think, so prove them right!
- Always have something prepared for all the likely topics so you won't be left speechless.
- **Try to lead the conversation.** If you know one topic really well and have a lot to say, keep talking about it, it shows competency. Also try to have some impressive vocab learned for that topic too if you know you're likely to talk about it.
- If the examiner asks you a question on something you're not too confident with, change it to suit yourself. For example, if you hate books but love sport and the examiner asks



you 'Aimez- vous des livres?', you could say 'Non, Ça ne m'intéresse pas, mais j'adore le sport...' and so on. Your ability to control and continue the conversation with fluidity will gain you a lot of extra marks.

- If the examiner asks you something you're unsure of, unfamiliar with, or you just don't like, there are several sentences that you could learn off to accommodate for this. For example, the 'Ça ne m'intéresse pas' example I used above, or 'Je ne sais pas beaucoup au sujet de..'. If he/she asks you something you don't understand, you will not lose marks for not understanding. Merely say, 'Desolée. Pouvez-vous repeter la question si vous plait?' and they will rephrase the question in an easier form for you.
- If you know you're weak at one topic, try to avoid it by making sure you don't say anything that leads to that subject. For example, if you hate talking about alcohol but the examiner asks you what you did for your 18th birthday, don't say that you went out to nightclubs with your friends as this could lead to a question like, 'buvez-vous?'.
- Some students choose to bring in a document with them, which, if they do, takes up about 5 minutes of the conversation. If you are undecided about whether to do one or not, I would recommend doing one. It's something that you can be almost 100% prepared for and you're guaranteed to spend a good portion of the exam on it, eliminating some chance of being asked something obscure or something you're not prepared for it you continue with normal conversation.
- The document can be one of lots of things; a picture, a poem, a newspaper clipping/heading, etc., but it has to be in French. Try to have it on a topic that the examiner won't be seeing all the time from other students, such as homelessness, poverty, sport, etc. They will have seen a lot of these and therefore may want to change things up by asking you strange questions. If you do it on an obscure subject however, there's a good chance that they'll just ask you general, easy questions on it because they won't have seen anything like it before.



Regarding how the exam is marked out, it's divided in to 4 sections; Pronunciation (20%), Vocabulary (20%), Structure (30%) and Communication (30%).

- When it comes to pronunciation, in order to gain high marks, you should make sure not to fall into little common traps that students make when speaking French. For example, many students lose marks for pronouncing trop as 'trohp' instead of 'troh'. Know how the language is meant to be spoken and how different letters are meant to sound. **The exam is a lot about being dramatic and theatrical**, I think. So **don't feel embarrassed or stupid about putting on a French accent**, or using little French filler words like 'alors' or 'eh bien'.
- Vocabulary is obviously important, so, like I said earlier, I would recommend learning some impressive words for the topics which you're confident you will be asked on so that you can show off to the examiner your ability. This especially goes for those doing the document.
- Structure refers to grammar and the likes. I know your mind can go blank in the exam, but try your best to use the right tense when speaking to the examiner. He/she will probably try to test you on the past/present/future/conditional tense so listen carefully to the question asked so you can distinguish which tense you should be giving your answer in. Try to perfect your other grammar points too, for example, try to use the right prepositions, the right adjectives etc.
- Communication is the fluidity of your speaking and how well you can keep up the conversation, so, like I said earlier, **keep talking**. A lull in the conversation will show incompetency so do your best to avoid silences.

*Time flies* in there and before you know it, she/he will be saying 'Merci, vous êtes fini', you may leave and you can breathe a sigh of relief!



## The Written Exam

This exam consists of 2 sections; Section 1: Compréhension Écrite, which is two comprehensions that you must answer questions on and Section 2: Production Écrite, which is a choice of different essay titles or prompts which you must write pieces on.

### Section 1

There are two comprehensions to do, each worth 60 marks. You must answer every question from both comprehensions.

- Comprehension 1 is usually an article or an interview and comprehension 2 is usually an extract from a story. In both cases, your job is straightforward; answer the questions using words from the text.
- Usually, there will be clues in the questions asked. For example, the word in the question can often be found in a sentence in the given paragraph so you know immediately where to look for your answer.
- The questions are in French so make sure you know what the question terms commonly used mean. For example, **know the meaning of the words like 'Relevez', 'Trouvez' 'Pourquoi', 'Où' 'Citez'**, etc. These often appear so you know to know what you're being asked in order to give the correct answer.
- Sometimes, merely quoting the text word for word isn't enough, so I would recommend **being able to manipulate and change sentences to suit the question asked**. For example, let's say the text is an interview with Marie, a girl who is moving house. The question asks why Marie wasn't to move house, but if the text has Marie's answer in first person, e.g. 'Je veux déménager car je n'aime pas mes voisins' ('I want to move because I don't like my neighbours') for example, then you can't quote that, because it's not answering the question



correctly. Instead, you should change the sentence into answer form by saying 'car elle n'aime pas ses voisins' ('because she doesn't like her neighbours'). Just watch out for things like this.

- One question in each comprehension nearly always asks for you to find a grammar point within the text. For example 'Trouvez un adjectif ay feminine dans la quatrième section' ('Find a feminine adjective in the 4th section'). This is very much like in the Irish comprehensions and the same goes for studying for it (and it's quite gruelling, sorry). Pretty much the only way around it is just to know and learn off all the different grammar points and know what to look for with each. For example, if they ask for an adjective, more often than not, it will appear after a noun, or if they're looking for an adverb, you'll know to look for a word ending in 'ment'.
- Learning little tips and tricks for recognising the grammar points will help a lot. Perhaps you could set aside a day or evening of French study to focus on this alone, as it's a guaranteed question.
- The last question in the comprehensions is one which you must answer in English/Irish and usually you must give your opinion of the character/topic/text or whether the topic/character was good/bad/clever/etc. These are easy marks to get once you understand the text and know what they're looking for. The marking scheme is usually quite broad for this question and almost any answer is corrected, so long as it makes some sense and relates to the text. Make sure you reference the text too in your answer, to show you understood it. Quoting the text can also help.



## Section 2

- This section is worth 100 marks overall. You must do a total of 3 essays. There are four sub-sections within this section. Each sub-section has two essay titles or prompts to choose from. You can only do one essay from each sub-section e.g. within Q.3, you can't do (a) and (b).
- Then, to make things more confusing Question 1 is obligatory, so you must do one of the options within that questions and it's worth 40 marks. Then, you need only choose 2 questions from Q.2, Q.3 or Q.4, each worth 30 marks.
- You'll need to write a bit more for Question 1. They say about 90 words, but in reality, if you want to get high marks and if your essay is of high standard, you'll write more than that. That being said, don't overdo it either. If you start writing out extra sentences just for the sake of it, there's a chance you could make a mistake and lose marks. So, if you're writing something extra but you're unsure of a spelling/grammar point, I would advise to just leave it if it's not essential to the essay.
- An option for Question 1 is often the Récit. This is where you can write a short story (real or imaginary) on the topic given. If you choose to do one, it's important that you **know the typical sentences that are used in short stories**, such as 'tout d'un coup' ('all of a sudden') or 'je venais de...' ('I had just..'), and so on.
- It's also important that you write emotionally for the Récit, as the prompt usually asks for your recollection of a moment in time or a situation you were in, so you need to **know different emotions in French to describe your feelings** in that moment. For example, 'Ma coeur battait très vite.' (my heart beat very fast.), 'J'étais fou de joie' ('I was overjoyed') or 'Je n'en croyais pas mes yeux' ('I couldn't believe my eyes').

- Finally, if you're doing the Récit, it's essential that you **know the difference between the imparfait and the passé composé**. When writing the Récit, people often use the imperfect tense a lot because they are describing a continuous action in the past (this is the imparfait, the past tense is a singular action). It's therefore essential that you know when to use what tense.
- Sometimes, another option for question 1 is a letter which you must write. They usually give about 5 or 6 points which you must mention in the letter. Some people choose this option because it seems easy and all laid out for you, but to be honest, it's actually one of the hardest options you can choose. They tend to catch people out by throwing in a hard point which students might not know how to phrase or might not know the vocabulary for. So, unless you're very confident and know that you could write something on each point, I would steer clear of it.
- As far as questions 2, 3 and 4 go, they're all generally the same in terms of layout. You should write about a page on whatever topic is given. A wide range of topics can come up so it's hard to be fully prepared for this section. I would recommend knowing what's in the news the year you're doing your LC so you know what could come up in terms of current events. Themes like alcohol, racism, unemployment, smoking, violence, media, poverty, etc., are always good to have studied and have prepared because they often come up.
- Try to **have a wide range of vocabulary that could suit different topics** so that if something comes up that you haven't really studied for, you can still write a good essay.
- **Have general phrases learned off and prepared that could suit any essay.** I had many different sentences like 'il ne se passe pas une journée sans que..' ('A day doesn't go by that..') and 'il va sans dire que' ('It goes without saying that..') learned to fill any essay that I didn't know that much about.



- A lot of your essays may need to start with you agreeing or disagreeing with a statement given, so I recommend you learn off different ways of saying that you agree/disagree, such as 'Je suis tout à fait d'accord avec cette déclaration' ('I am in total agreement with this statement') or 'On ne peut pas nier que..' ('One cannot deny that..'), etc.
- It's essential that you **read and understand fully the question/statement/prompt**, because if you write an essay on something irrelevant or if you skip a certain part of the question, you'll lose a lot of marks.
- Finally, if you want top marks and want to show the examiner that you have a high standard of French, **I recommend learning some French proverbs**, if you can, to put at the end of your essays. For example, 'Paris ne s'est pas fait en un jour' ('Paris wasn't built in a day') or 'Qui vivra verra' ('time will tell') . Make sure it suits the essay though, otherwise it will make no sense.
- Another thing that would show off your French competency is the subjunctive. It's very difficult but if you can get a grasp on it, it shows that you have a high standard of French. What I did was, I had several general phrases with the subjunctive in them learned off so I could use it in almost any of my essays. For example, 'il faut que le gouvernement fasse...' ('It's necessary that the government makes/does..') or 'il est impératif que nous soyons' ('It's imperative that we are/be..'), etc. Of course you need to know how it works properly to be able to use it, so if you choose to tackle it, learn when, why and how it's used.



## The Aural Exam

This part is the final part of the French exam. It's worth 80 marks and has 5 different sections. Like in the Irish aural, the sections are comprised of interviews, conversations and news pieces.

- Your answers must be in English/Irish.
- You'll get time to read through the questions before the tape starts so if I were you, I'd **highlight the key words in each question** and make sure you know what they're looking for.
- If you see a word in the question that you know the French word for, write the word above it so that you know to listen out for that word in the tape.
- I would recommend writing out only key words in your answer when you first hear the tape and then come back to it when you have time to fill in the rest of the answer because you may miss out on another question while you were writing out another answer.
- **Don't leave anything blank, ever!** If you haven't a clue what the answer should be to a question but you did understand a word or two in the sentence, write down those words, you never know what could get you marks.



## In General...

- If you feel you're struggling with French, or even if you just want to improve or practise it, I really recommend downloading the app '**Duolingo**'. It's free and there are different levels for you to complete. I found it so helpful when studying French because it was fun, easy and it kept me in practise so my grammar never went rusty. Plus, it's a source of handy vocabulary that you might not get in school.
- Another big help for me, especially for the oral and aural exams, was **listening to French radio, watching French TV and reading French books**. Listening to the radio will accustom your ears to the French language and you can pick out words easier in the aural exam. You can download an app called 'TuneInRadio' that lets you listen to any radio station in the world so you have many French stations to choose from. You can download French books off iBooks if you have an apple phone and there are many French books in libraries across the country too. Reading books will help you interpret the comprehensions better and will improve and widen your range of vocabulary.
- Finally, **organisation is key**. It's hard enough to learn a new language without having your notes completely scattered and messed up. **Try to organise a French folder that has different sections for oral, aural and written work**, it will make life easier when you're studying later on.



Bon courage!

I'm sure you'll do great.