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# French

How to get a Distinction in Junior Cycle French



by **Ciara M.**

*Ciara was a top student in her French class. Here, she shares some advice that she believes will help you achieve a Distinction in Junior Cycle French.*

The new Junior Cycle French course is a little different to the old course. For starters, it is not split into Higher and Ordinary levels, but rather is studied at a Common Level by all students. The new course is also more modern and teaches a large variety of skills that are useful for the future - language skills, intercultural awareness, communication, creativity, and much more. While not as predictable as the old course might have been, the paper is still accessibly structured and very doable. In this guide, you will hopefully get a better understanding of the course and how to ace it!

## Contents

Exam Layout	3
CBA 1: Oral Communication	4
CBA 2: The Student Language Portfolio	8
Assessment Task	10
Final Assessment	11
Some Final tips	17



## Exam Layout

- ▶ Junior Cycle French is **marked out of 400**. The Written Exam is worth **360 marks (90%)** and the Assessment task is worth **40 marks (10%)**.
- ▶ You will be marked using the following grade descriptors, which will appear on both the **certificate** you receive on results day and your **Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA)**:

Grade Descriptor	Percentage
Distinction	≥90 to100
Higher Merit	≥75 to<90
Merit	≥55 to<75
Achieved	≥40 to<55
Partially Achieved	≥20 to<40
Not Graded (NG)	≥0 to<20

- ▶ There are also **two CBAs (Classroom Based Assessments)** on the course and they are marked using different grade descriptors again: **Exceptional, Above expectations, In line with expectations**, and **Yet to meet expectations**. The grade you receive on your CBAs will only appear on your JCPA, and does not influence your overall grade on the course.



## CBA 1: Oral Communication

The first CBA will likely take place in second year, there's lots of time to focus on it before the workload of third year begins. It is an oral presentation, replacing the old oral exam. Even though this might sound very intimidating to some, getting an 'Exceptional' is definitely achievable as long as you put in enough time and effort!

You may choose one of the four following formats for your CBA 1:

- ☒ **Presentation:** Here, the student presents an area of interest in front of their class and responds to questions based on their topic by their teacher. I chose this format and presented it on 'Ma Ville de Rêve' (My Dream Town).
- ☒ **Roleplay:** A pair or group act out a scripted roleplay (e.g. reserving a hotel room) and answer unscripted questions from their teacher afterwards.
- ☒ **Interview:** The student answers scripted questions from another student or their teacher about a topic of interest. The teacher will ask additional unscripted questions at the end.
- ☒ **Conversation in response to stimulus material:** The student chooses stimulus material about which the teacher then asks unscripted questions. This is the hardest format in my opinion, as



you are asked unscripted questions for the full three minutes rather than 30 seconds at the end.

- ☒ **Picking your topic:** When choosing your topic, the most important thing to do is to pick something you know a lot about already or something you're very interested in. This will give you the necessary motivation to prepare the presentation you possibly can, and will make it a lot easier to answer unscripted questions at the end. I would also recommend selecting a topic that can be discussed using simple language. Try not to choose something that requires knowledge of a branch of French you haven't already covered in class, e.g. don't talk about a holiday you've been on if you haven't covered the passé composé.

**Preparation and practice:** It's imperative that you are completely prepared by the time the day of your presentation comes round. You should have 2-3 weeks to prepare before this, so make sure to make good use out of this time. Below I will outline my step-by-step approach to preparing for the presentation:

1. During the first week, I started off by **brainstorming ideas** materials for my oral communication piece.
2. Next, I moved on to **gathering the necessary information** and
3. Then, I began the process of **putting it all together**.



4. After this, I made sure to **ask my teacher to check** that all the grammar, verbs, and sentence structure were correct.
  5. I then began **memorising** my piece. While some teachers allow flashcards to be used, you should try to avoid this if you want a higher score.
  6. I **practiced** my piece as much as I could to ensure that I was fully confident when the time came to present. You can prepare for the unscripted questions by revising question pronouns (qui, quel, comment, etc.), and getting a friend to ask questions related to your topic.
  7. If you're given the opportunity, do a **trial run of your CBA in front of your class teacher** - if your teacher gives any feedback, take it into consideration for the real thing!
  8. Furthermore, I used the '[Features of Quality](#)' rubric sheet online to try to **predict what I would have got based on my practice runs**, and then made notes on what I needed to improve on in order to achieve a higher mark on my CBA.
- 📌 On the day of your presentation, you will be recorded by your teacher either on your own or in front of a couple of classmates. Don't let this throw you off - **this video will not be seen by anyone except (possibly) the French teachers in your school and/or an inspector**. Additionally, if you really don't want anyone but your teacher in the room (they must be there), you can always speak privately



with them and request that there be no audience. Whatever you have to do to feel comfortable!

- ☒ When presenting, remember to **speak slowly and steadily to nail your pronunciation and fill the time required**. Stick to the plan as much as you can and try not to improvise/add anything on the spur of the moment.
- ☒ When answering unscripted questions, try to **listen for key words in the question**. For example, in the question “*Qui est ton chanteur préféré?*”, the key words let you know that you are likely being asked who your favourite singer is. Try to give full answers where you can. For example, rather than answering the previous sample question with just the name of your favourite singer, try to **respond with a full sentence** like this: “*Mon chanteur préféré est Harry Styles.*”
- ☒ You will have to fill out a reflection sheet after finishing this CBA, but it’s not going towards your grade so it’s really nothing to worry about!



## CBA 2: The Student Language Portfolio

The second CBA in French will be completed in third year. It is an individual student language portfolio, requiring you to pick your three best pieces of work produced during second and third year.

The Student Language Portfolio (SLP) comprises three different pieces:

- ☒ **Oral piece:** This is a spoken piece **other than CBA 1** that you can record yourself and send in or have your teacher record in class (consult your teacher to see if they have a preference). The same advice from CBA 1 can be applied here: I would recommend that you **pick a topic that you are comfortable speaking about** and perfecting the pronunciation for a top class presentation!
- ☒ **Cultural piece:** This is a spoken or written piece on a **Francophone country**. There is a wide range of countries to choose from, including but not limited to the following: France, Belgium, Monaco, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Rwanda, Cameroon, Madagascar, Tunisia, Canada, Guyana, Haiti, Vanuatu, etc.
- ☒ When you have chosen your country, research and divide your information into different



sections, e.g. *Nourriture* (Food),  
*Villes* (Cities), etc.

☒ Some teachers might have you do this piece in different ways (e.g. a piece about cultures from a lot of different Francophile countries) but the main thing to focus on is checking there are **no mistakes** and writing the recommended amount.

☒ **Other piece:** This is a spoken or written piece on a topic of your choice. It is most convenient to **select a piece you have already put work into and that has been previously corrected by your teacher.** This way, you don't have to put unnecessary time and effort into it!

☒ As was the case with CBA 1, you will have to fill out a reflection sheet on each of the pieces after handing in your SLP. However, even though it's not going towards your final mark in the CBA, I would recommend putting as much effort as you can into it as it will help you complete the Assessment Task (see below).



## Assessment Task

The Assessment Task is a written reflection on the work you have done for CBA 2, and so will likely take place in the spring of third year. You will have eighty minutes to complete it, and it is worth 10% of your final grade for Junior Cycle French. That may not sound like much, but remember, that could be the difference between a Distinction and a Higher Merit, so you should try your very best!

You will do the Assessment Task over two separate classes:

- ☒ **First class:** In this class, you are given your Assessment Task booklet and are allowed to discuss it with your class. Pose any questions you might have to your teacher in this class rather than at the last minute. I would recommend writing down all the questions in the booklet into your copy or on a sheet so you can plan out your answers later that day.
  
- ☒ **Second class:** In this class, you will be writing out your answers into the booklet. This is completed in an exam setting. However, you are allowed to bring in your CBA 2 work and notes, which can be very helpful to use when writing up answers. You should have a pretty good idea of what your answers will be from the planning stage, so just make sure to write them out in time! There is not much room to write your answers so the simpler the better! Use simple, effective language. Don't include too many points if there's no room to develop them.



## Final Assessment

The French Junior Cycle Exam takes place in June of third year and is worth 360 marks or 90% of your overall grade. There are three sections to this exam - Listening , Reading, and Writing.

**Listening Section (140 marks):** The listening section on the French Junior Cycle paper is worth almost 40% of the Final Assessment, so it's important to know how to do well on it! It takes approximately 30 minutes, and typically includes 7 questions. These questions can be asked in either French or English, and may even include pictures. Each section plays three times. Here are the three main ways I prepared for the listening section:

1. **Learning vocabulary** is very important for the listening section because if you can get a good grasp of the meaning of the audio, then it will be very easy to answer any sort of question thrown at you - be they in French or English. Try to **identify the way you learn vocab best** - for me it was flashcards, but other people may prefer mind maps, etc. Some of the most important topics to revise for this section include **time, numbers, days of the week, months of the year, jobs, family, places, weather and hobbies.**



2. **Practice questions** are helpful for every aspect of the final assessment as they consist of questions that are realistic to what you'll be asked on the day. However I would especially recommend doing as many listening samples as you can find as this will help you improve your skills! **Don't listen to the track more than three times** when you're practising, as you'll only be allowed to listen to it three times on exam day. Then when you're marking the answers, you can listen to it as many times as you need to hear the vocab and pronunciation. Try to **note any words you don't understand** (even if the questions aren't directly related to them) and afterwards **look up their meaning**. The vocabulary used in aural sections is generally quite repetitive, so it's worth your while to be familiar with the most common words tested.

3. **Watching television** was my favourite way to prepare as I got to watch some of my favourite TV shows and movies, only this time, in French! I would recommend **watching a program you have seen already in English**, so that way you're familiar with the plot. All you have to do is log on to Netflix, Hulu - whatever you use most - and **switch the audio and subtitles to French** (not English, because then you will be tempted to just read them instead of listening to the French dialogue).

☒ Before the audio begins to play, **question, and highlight/underline key words.** For



example, 'What is the budget for the dream holiday?' This way when you're listening to the audio, you can know exactly what you're listening for.

- ⊗ **Highlight whether you have to answer the question in French or English.** This is very important! You will lose all marks for the section if you answer in the incorrect language. The general rule is, 'if the question is in English, answer in English. If the question is in French, answer in French' - but always double check!
- ⊗ If you have time, you could **write down the French for the key words beside them.** This will help you pick out the relevant

audio section much faster. You can also write down some **associated words that you might expect to hear** (for example, using the question above: argent (money) or mille (thousand)).

- ⊗ The audio plays **three times for each question in the listening**, so always **spend the first time listening and not writing to get a feel for what the audio clip is about.** Mark any questions you think might be tricky with a star or circle. During the second and third time, write down the answers to the questions and listen out for anything you might have missed.
- ⊗ **Watch out for number questions!** Those can be tricky. If



you're struggling with a particular number, you **can write out the phonetics (sound)** of it and afterwards translate it to English.

- ☒ **Try not to leave any blank spaces.** You don't lose any marks

for a wrong answer, so you're better off taking a guess and potentially picking up some marks.

**Reading Section (140 marks):** The reading section is also worth a lot of marks, so it's crucial to do well on it if you want that Distinction grade. There are normally 7 reading comprehensions in this section.

- ☒ This section is pretty broad but if you do enough **practice questions**, I find you can get quite good at answering the questions, even with limited knowledge. You also get a pretty good understanding of commonly asked questions, and how to scan a text quickly while still getting all the information needed to answer. Not much grammar is needed for this section, so just **revise your vocab** and you'll be good to go!
- ☒ I would recommend spending an average of **3-5 minutes on each of the 7 questions** - some will only take 2 minutes, but others require more reading and longer answers, so it really depends. This totals to a maximum of **35 minutes on**



**this section**, and I would strongly advise spending a couple minutes afterwards reading over all your answers.

- ☒ Work through the questions carefully and come back to ones you're stuck on later. **Never spend too much time on one question**, because this will cost you time and potentially marks.
- ☒ **Look at titles, pictures, etc. before reading** the text to get clues on what it will be about. Once you have an idea of the topic, read through the text. You don't have to understand every word, but rather, get the bigger picture.
- ☒ **Write as much relevant information as you can** in comprehension answers because the marking scheme will often require detailed answers.

**Writing Section (80 marks):** While this section may not be worth as many marks as the previous two, the preparation you do for this section will be the most helpful overall. There are three questions in this section- the first one typically entails **filling out a form**, the second is a **grammar exercise**, and the third is an **email/blog**.

- ☒ This section of the exam probably requires the most preparation. You will have to **go over a lot of vocab and grammar** to avoid mistakes, but don't let this scare you. **Work smarter instead of harder** by spending more time covering



material you know will come up. For example, you can get some easy marks by just learning off the structure of an email/blog and what you must always include, i.e. greeting, date, sign-off, etc.

- ☒ With regard to timing, I would recommend spending **10-15 minutes on the first question, 5 minutes on the second, and 15-20 minutes on the third**. Spend a couple minutes after looking over all this work. That said, you should always allocate some of that time to **planning**. Always use the rough work section to brainstorm ideas, outline your points, and identify the vocabulary you're going to use.
  
- ☒ Try to **have a few complex sentences/phrases that you know have correct French prepared before the exam**. This will impress the examiner and might even help you pick up a few marks. However, I wouldn't recommend attempting to create a complex sentence on the day of the exam. It's better to use simple sentences in accurate French than complex sentences with bad French.
  
- ☒ As always, try to **use the tense that the question is asked in**. For example, if the question is asked in the *futur simple*, try not to answer in the *futur proche*.



## Some Final Tips

- ☒ If you study French for just **an hour per week throughout third year**, you will be confident going into the exam and more likely get very good marks! This is a way easier and **more successful method than cramming** the three-year course in a few weeks before your exam.
- ☒ That said, keep in mind that **it is never too late to start working** and that **you can still make massive improvements in your last few weeks**. I've seen some of my classmates **jump entire grades in the time between the mocks to the real exam**, so don't be discouraged if you don't do as well as you were expecting in them. This is actually the entire point of the mock exams - they motivate you to work harder!
- ☒ **Try not to be intimidated by your friends' notes or test scores**, or whatever is going on around you on the day of the exam. **Remember all the work you've done since first year**, and know that you are ready for this. **All you can do at the end of the day is YOUR best**. Also, these exams really aren't the end of the world, so even if you feel like it hasn't gone to plan, just say to yourself that you have gone in there and given it your best and that's all you can do, and that *Ce qui sera, sera!*



☒ The night before the exam:

Remember to **pack everything you need the night before the exam**. Try to also **get a good night's sleep** to ensure you don't feel sluggish or tired during the exam.

☒ The morning of the exam:

Have a **healthy breakfast and a good amount of water** the day of the exam. **Listen to a French radio station** directly before the exam if you can access it to be in mode for the listening portion.

☒ During the exam:

**Only use a blue or black pen** (not pencil) in your exam because it will be scanned by a computer and **the scanner cannot pick up pencil!**

☒ **Think and plan before writing to**

avoid lots of scribbles that may leave a bad impression on the examiner. If you need to quickly jot something down, **use a spare page**. You should also use the extra pages at the end of the paper if needed for extra writing space. **Make sure to clearly label which question you are answering if you end up doing this.**

☒ **Don't leave any questions blank**

- you'll be amazed at how many marks you can pick up just by guessing.

☒ **Never leave your exam early!**

This exam gives you plenty of time so there is a high chance you will be finished before time is up. Even if you're finished an



hour early, you'll regret not using the extra time to your advantage to check over and improve all

your answers. Remember, **marks** can also be gained inside the exam hall!



**Bonne chance à tous!**

