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## Le français interactif — À vs De: Two Essential Prepositions

As a French teacher, I always dread the moment when a student asks me: "How do I know whether to use *à* or *de*?" It is one of those questions to which it is impossible to give a simple answer, and this choice is a constant challenge for students of French. In order to clarify the usage of one or the other, I've written a synopsis which categorizes them depending on various contexts. I would like to encourage you to study it carefully. Despite their tiny size, if these two prepositions are not used properly, the meaning of the sentence can change completely!

Generally speaking you will need to use them in the following ways:

*à* means **to**, **at**, or **in**

*de* (which becomes *d'* in front of a vowel), means **of** or **from**.

**Note** that when followed by a definite article, both of these prepositions form contractions:

*à* + *le* = **au**; *à* + *la* = **à la**; *à* + *les* = **aux**

*de* + *le* = **du**; *de* + *la* = **de la**; *de* + *les* = **des**

### À vs De: which one to use, and when?

#### 1) Destination: *à*

When telling someone which city you are going to:

*Je vais à Paris* = I'm going to Paris.

VS

#### Departure: *de*

When telling someone from which city you came from:

*Je viens de Paris* = I'm coming from Paris.

#### 2) Location: *à*

When telling someone where you are currently located:

*Je suis à Paris* = I am in Paris.

VS

#### Origin: *de*

When telling someone where you come from:

*D'où êtes-vous ?* = Where are you from?

*Je suis de Paris* = I am from Paris.

**Note** that the preposition *à* is used with cities and with masculine countries (those that don't end in an *e*). For feminine countries, the preposition *en* is used.

*Je vais à Montréal demain* = I'm going to Montreal tomorrow.

*Elle habite en France* = She lives in France.

*Nous voulons aller au Brésil cet été* = We want to go to Brazil this summer.

### 3) Distance in time or space: **à**

When describing how far or how long it takes to go to a place:

*Il travaille à 10 minutes d'ici* = He works 10 minutes from here.

*Il habite à 2 kms d'ici* = He lives 2 km from here.

VS

### Indicating the starting point: **de**

When you are telling someone the place where an action starts:

*De Paris, il faut 3 heures de TGV pour aller à Marseille* = From Paris, 3 hours by TGV are needed to get to Marseille.

### **À** is also used for telling time

When telling someone at what time an event starts:

*Ils arrivent à 20h pour le dîner* = They are coming at 8 pm for dinner.

### 4) Purpose or use: **à**

When telling someone what an item is for:

*Une boîte à biscuits* = a box for cookies.

*Un verre à vin* = a wine glass.

*Un moule à soufflé* = a souffle mold.

VS

### Contents / description: **de**

When referring to the contents of a recipient:

*Une boîte de biscuits* = a box full of cookies.

*Un verre de vin* = a glass of wine.

### 5) Possession: **à**

When telling someone the relationship between 2 people or a person and a thing

*Un voisin à moi* = a neighbour of mine.

*La voiture est à mon mari* = It's my husband's car.

VS

### Belonging = **de**

When telling someone a possession with names and nouns. It is equivalent to 's or s' in English:

*Le livre d'Alex* = Alex's book.

*La plus belle ville de France est Paris* = The most beautiful city of France is Paris.

### 6) Manner, characteristic and style: **à**

When expressing something that is handmade, or done in a specific style:

*C'est fait à l'ancienne* = It is done the old-fashioned, traditional way.

When describing a physical appearance or a characteristic:

*Une fille aux cheveux blonds* = a girl with blond hair.

*Une tarte aux pommes* = an apple pie.

**Note** that when speaking about the main ingredient in a food dish, you will need to use **à**:

*Une lasagne au saumon* = a salmon lasagna.

*Un sandwich au thon* = a tuna sandwich.

VS

### Defining feature: **de**

When defining what an object or place is for:

*Un livre de géographie* = a geography book.

*Un cours de français* = a French class.

## Which verbs are followed by *de* or *à* before another verb in the infinitive form?

Up until now, I have been able to draw up a summary of the general use of these two prepositions. Nevertheless, when it comes to figuring out which verbs trigger *à*, which ones trigger *de* or which ones are not followed by any preposition, there are no rules to help you. Therefore, I suggest selecting a few very useful verbs and seeing how they work.

**First, let's start with a list of verbs that are not followed by a preposition** (you will notice that many of the verbs ending by *oir* are included in this list):

*Aller*: *Je vais manger* = I'm going to eat.

*Vouloir*: *Je veux vivre en France* = I want to live in France.

*Devoir*: *Je dois partir* = I must leave.

*Pouvoir*: *Je peux vous demander quelque chose ?* = May I ask you for something?

*Falloir*: *Il faut se concentrer* = One has to focus.

*Aimer/adorer*: *J'aime/J'adore prendre le train* = I like/I love to take the train.

*Faire*: *Je fais faire des maths aux enfants* = I'm having the kids do maths.

**Let's continue with a list of some very common verbs which take *de*, or *d'* before the infinitive form.** Here is a selection of the most useful verbs for you to study:

*Choisir de*: *Je choisis de faire ce métier* = I choose to do this job.

*Conseiller de*: *Je conseille de faire les devoirs* = I advise (you) to do the homework.

*Décider de*: *J'ai décidé de vivre en France* = I've decided to live in France.

*S'excuser de*: *Je m'excuse de vous déranger* = I'm sorry to disturb you.

*Finir de*: *J'ai fini de faire la lessive* = I've finished doing the laundry.

*Oublier de*: *J'ai oublié de vous appeler* = I forgot to call you.

*Promettre de*: *Je vous promets de revenir* = I promise you that I will be back.

*Proposer de*: *Il me propose d'habiter avec lui* = He's offered to move in with him.

*Risquer de*: *Je risque d'être en retard* = I risk being late.

*Refuser de*: *Il refuse de me répondre* = He refuses to answer me.

*Essayer de*: *J'essaie de faire plus d'efforts pour parler en français* = I'm trying to make a greater effort to speak French.

*Venir de*: *Je viens juste de voir mon voisin* = I've just seen my neighbour.

**Finally, here is a selection of the most useful verbs which trigger the preposition *à* before the infinitive form:**

*Aider à*: *J'aide à cuisiner* = I help with the cooking.

*Apprendre à*: *J'apprends à faire du tennis* = I'm learning how to play tennis.

*Arriver à*: *Je n'arrive pas à faire cet exercice* = I'm not able to do this exercise.

*Continuer à*: *Je continue à voir mes amis tous les lundis soirs* = I continue to see my friends every Monday evenings. (**Note:** You will also frequently hear **de** used after *continuer*. Ex: *Il continue de m'embêter* = He continues to bug/to bother me.)

*Commencer à*: *Je commence à avoir faim* = I'm starting to get hungry.

*S'habituer à*: *Je m'habitue à mon nouveau travail* = I'm getting used to my new job.

*Encourager à*: *J'encourage mon fils à faire du sport* = I encourage my son to do some sports.

*Hésiter à*: *J'hésite à déménager en France* = I hesitate to move to France.

*Réussir à*: *J'ai réussi à joindre Mark* = I was successful in reaching Mark.

**Note:** One more important note concerning the usage of *de*...: in many cases, we add *de* **after an adjective and before a verb in the infinitive form:**

*Il est gentil de conduire* = He is kind to drive.

*Je suis heureuse de vivre ici* = I'm happy to live here.

**Note** also that in the two examples above *gentil* and *heureuse* are both adjectives.

**And** that we use *de* **after a word expressing a quantity:** *beaucoup de, peu de, un kilo de...*:

*J'aimerais beaucoup de parmesan sur ma soupe* = I would like lots of parmesan on my soup.

*Céline Anthonioz*

## Exercices

### 1) Fill the blanks with *à, au, aux, de* or *d'*:

1. Nous allons \_\_\_\_\_ Portugal ce week-end.
2. Déjà ? Vous venez à peine \_\_\_\_\_ arriver !
3. \_\_\_\_\_ où êtes-vous ?
4. Je vais t'aider \_\_\_\_\_ vérifier tes devoirs.
5. Excuse-moi, j'ai oublié \_\_\_\_\_ te rappeler !
6. Vous vous êtes arrêté \_\_\_\_\_ quelle gare ?
7. Cette robe est faite \_\_\_\_\_ une soie très raffinée.
8. Est-ce que tu veux mettre les assiettes \_\_\_\_\_ soupe sur la table ?
9. Tu auras ton dessert quand tu auras fini ton assiette \_\_\_\_\_ soupe !
10. C'est \_\_\_\_\_ vous ce joli chien ?

### 2) Please translate the following sentences into French and try to use the right preposition:

1. We are from Australia.
2. I'll join you in the restaurant.
3. Her boyfriend is in Japan now.
4. Is he going to Sapporo?
5. He is hesitating to stay longer.
6. Have you been to the bakery yet?
7. Yes, I got the walnut bread that you prefer.
8. I like your wine glasses.
9. She is unable to travel alone.
10. They have decided to return soon.

## Scénario : Chatting in the train

**Henry et Christine sont assis côte à côte dans le train qui va de Paris à Marseille, et Henry a commencé une discussion avec elle.**

**Henry :** Bonjour, vous allez jusqu'où ?

**Christine :** Bonjour, je vais à Lyon. Et vous ?

**Henry :** Je vais à Marseille et je suis parti de Londres. Ça fait un long voyage.

**Christine :** En effet ! Je suis contente car j'ai réussi à avoir ce train. Il était normalement complet ! J'ai essayé de prendre un billet en 1ère classe mais il n'y avait plus de places.

**Henry :** Oui, je comprends pourquoi vous vouliez la 1ère, ce wagon est terriblement bruyant. Les enfants renoncent à l'idée de dormir ici !

**Christine :** Il faut avoir de la patience. En attendant, vous permettez mais je vais manger un morceau, j'ai très faim. Puis-je vous offrir un peu de tarte à l'abricot ?

**Henry :** Oh, non merci, j'ai un énorme sandwich au jambon ! Dites-moi, vous avez un tout petit accent. Vous êtes d'où, à l'origine ?

**Christine :** En fait, je suis de New York. Ma mère est française et mon père est américain. Je suis née à New York, mais j'ai vécu longtemps à Paris.

**Henry :** Quel beau mélange ! Et pourquoi avez-vous choisi de vivre à Paris ?

**Christine :** Principalement pour mon travail. Je l'adore et j'habite à 10 minutes à pied de mon bureau. Je suis heureuse de vivre à Paris, surtout dans un quartier d'artistes et d'intellectuels. Il y a beaucoup de choses à faire tous les jours... Je ne m'ennuie jamais.

**Henry :** Je comprends mais moi, je préfère la vie à la campagne... J'aime le rythme à l'ancienne. J'adore marcher dans la nature, j'essaie de prendre mon temps et je me suis habitué à vivre loin du stress de la ville.

**Christine :** Ah oui, ça fait aussi rêver de respirer de l'air frais... Il faut faire des choix dans la vie et pour le moment je choisis d'habiter en ville. J'arrive à vivre avec les

**Henry and Christine are sitting next to each other in the train going from Paris to Marseille and Henry has started up a conversation with her.**

**Henry:** Hello, where are you going?

**Christine:** Hello, I'm going to Lyon. And you?

**Henry:** I'm going to Marseille and I left from London. It's a long trip.

**Christine:** Indeed! I'm glad I was able to catch this train. It is normally full! I tried to get a first class ticket, but there weren't any more seats.

**Henry:** Yes, I understand why you had wanted 1st class, this carriage is terribly noisy. The children have given up on the idea of sleeping here!

**Christine:** We must be patient. Meanwhile, if you don't mind I'm going to have a bite to eat, I'm very hungry. Could I offer you a piece of apricot pie?

**Henry:** Oh no, thank you, I have a huge ham sandwich. Tell me, you have a slight accent. Where are you originally from?

**Christine:** Actually, I'm from New York. My mother is French and my father is American. I was born in New York and I've lived in Paris for a long time.

**Henry:** What a nice mix! And why have you chosen to live in Paris?

**Christine:** Mainly for my work. I love it and I live 10 minutes by foot from my office. I am happy to live in Paris, especially in an area with artists and intellectuals. There are many things to do everyday... I am never bored.

**Henry:** I understand but I prefer life in the country. I like the old fashioned pace. I love to go for walks in nature, I try to take my time and I am used to living far from the stress of the city.

**Christine:** Ah yes, it also makes one dream of breathing fresh air... We have to make choices in life and for the moment I choose to live in a city. I'm able to live with the

inconvénients de la ville. On verra plus tard si je décide d'aller à la campagne !	inconveniences of a city. We'll see later if I decide to go to the countryside!
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## Media Wordplay: *Un petit boost*

Among the many examples of English words that have discretely slipped into the French language is the verb “to boost”. It has been in use already for several years and has been slightly adapted in the way the French often do : *booster*, with the same meaning : *Je vais engager un nouveau manager pour booster mon business* = I am going to hire a new manager to boost my business).

But *booster* is conjugated quite differently than its English equivalent.

In the present tense, one says : *je booste, tu boostes, il/elle/on booste, nous boostons, vous boostez, ils/elles boostent*. It becomes, of course, more complicated in the future (*je boosterai, tu boosteras, il/elle/on boostera, nous boosterons, vous boosterez, ils/elles boosteront*), and the past tenses : *passé composé* (*j'ai boosté, etc..., nous avons boosté...*), *imparfait* (*je boostais, etc... nous boostions*), and *passé simple* (*je boostai, etc... nous boostâmes*).

We will spare you the other tenses, such as the lovely combinations of *conditionnel passé + imparfait du subjonctif*: *il eût fallu que je boostasse, etc..., il eût fallu que nous boostassions*.

However, before the English word got a firm foothold in the French business world, and at home (in expressions such as *booster sa mémoire* = to boost one's memory), it was already in use in technical expressions. But in this case *booster* was a noun and not a verb.

*Un booster* is a type of engine you put in space shuttles, a system to increase the capacity of a video game, or the coating for a ping pong table to make the ball travel faster, etc.

More recently, the word *boost* itself has been adopted in everyday language, mainly in this expression : *donner un petit coup de boost*, to whatever: your computer, your old motorbike, an artist who needs to be better known, or one's morale...

And only earlier this month one could hear on the radio another way to use our famous word : *un petit boost*, which is not at all linked to any technical matter. A woman who owns a shop and who wants to increase her clientele said that she will give *un petit boost* to encourage more people to come. And we can't let this opportunity pass to *donner un petit boost* to our readers to encourage them to learn more about this very bizarre language that is French.

*Céline Anthonioz*

## *Le coin des branchés*

So many expressions in French have their origins in food and “la cuisine”. Here are a few examples of these expressions, which are in addition to those we have already given in previous issues:

**Marcher sur des œufs** = to be extremely cautious when dealing with something/someone (lit.: to walk on eggs).

**Ne pas mettre tous les œufs dans le même panier** = not to put every hope/money on a single project (lit.: not to put all your eggs in the same basket).

**On ne fait pas d'omelette sans casser des œufs** = one doesn't do anything without making a little sacrifice (lit.: one doesn't make an omelet without breaking eggs).

**Etre soupe au lait** = to change your mood frequently (lit.: to be a soup with milk).

**Boire du petit lait** = to appreciate plainly a positive situation (lit.: drink whey).

**Faire son beurre** = to make good money (lit.: to make one's butter); **on ne peut pas avoir le beurre et l'argent du beurre** = you can't have your cake and eat it.

**Etre une vraie crème** = to be a lovely and easygoing person.

**Donner du grain à moudre** = to give someone something to think about, something to chew over (lit.: to give grain to be ground).

**Rouler quelqu'un dans la farine** = to rip off/to cheat/to hustle someone (lit.: to roll someone in flour).

**Etre dans le pétrin** = to find oneself in a very difficult situation from which it is not easy to get out (lit.: to be in the dough kneading trough).

**Se vendre comme des petits pains** = to sell very fast and easily, to sell like pancakes.

**Ecrire des tartines** = to write a lot (lit.: to write slices of bread).

**Retirer/enlever le pain de la bouche de quelqu'un** = to deprive someone of what is necessary (lit.: to take bread from the mouth of someone).

**Etre une nouille** = to be stupid (lit.: to be a noodle).

**Etre une tête de lard** = to be stubborn (lit.: to be a head of pig fat).

**Vivre comme un coq en pâte** = To be sitting on top of the world (lit.: to live like a rooster in pastry).

**Ajouter son grain de sel** = to add one's own opinion to a discussion (lit.: to add one's grain of salt).

**En faire tout un fromage** = to make a big fuss over something not important/much ado about nothing (lit.: to do a whole cheese).

**Casser du sucre sur le dos de quelqu'un** = to tell negative things about someone (lit.: to break sugar on the back of someone).

**Etre tout sucre (tout miel) avec quelqu'un** = to be very nice (a little too much even) to someone (lit.: to be all sugar - or all honey - with someone).

**C'est du gâteau** = this is very easy/to be as easy as cake.

**Ce n'est pas de la tarte** = this is not easy.

**C'est la cerise sur le gâteau** = this is the little plus on something already positive (lit.: this is the cherry on the cake).

**Prendre de la brioche** = to get fat, big.

**Prendre de la bouteille** = to become richer with knowledge and experience.

**Mettre de l'eau dans son vin** = to become more moderate (lit.: to put water in one's wine).

**Avoir l'eau à la bouche** = to feel hungry (lit.: to have water/saliva in one's mouth)