



## Interactive French — Scenario of the Month

### Quelques formules de politesse - A few polite forms

One of the first expressions everyone learns when settling in France is 'Je voudrais' (I would like), which works very well for simple everyday life transactions in stores, at the markets, or for obtaining general information. But, when you wish to ask for a favour or some additional information, 'Je voudrais' might seem too demanding! It would be more appropriate and polite to use one of the following forms:

Serait-il possible de... ? =

Would it be possible to...?

Pourriez-vous... ? = Could you...?

Est-ce que ça vous dérangerait de... ? = Would you mind ...?



In French grammar, we use the 'conditionnel' when forming polite requests (the equivalent of 'would' and 'could' in English). This is how the construction works:

*Serait-il possible de* + 2<sup>nd</sup> verb in the infinitive form (you leave that 2<sup>nd</sup> verb alone, you don't need to conjugate it!).

This is how we form 'could' in the conditional according to the different subject pronouns:

Est-ce que je pourrais ? = Could I?

Est-ce que vous pourriez ?

Pourriez-vous ? (with the 'vous' form) = Could you?

Est-ce qu'il/elle pourrait ?

"Pourrait-il/elle ? = Could he/she?

Est-ce que nous pourrions ?

Pourrions-nous ? = Could we?

Est-ce qu'ils pourraient ?

Pourraient-ils ? = Could they?



**Note :** "Could I?" can be said in two different ways : 'Est-ce que je pourrais ?' (frequently used and less formal) or 'Puis-je?' (old fashioned or formal).

If you have never used these polite forms, I strongly suggest that you learn these three expressions for questions and use them in your everyday life. The French will appreciate your efforts and will usually reply positively with a smile!

How and when do we use these polite forms?

Imagine you are sitting in a *brasserie* and you've just ordered a *café*. You would like to have a glass of water with the coffee but it is not customary for the French to provide it spontaneously. In this situation, using 'Je voudrais' might seem again a bit demanding! If you approach the waiter by using one of the polite expressions, you will sound kind and respectful to the waiter. This is what you could say:

**Excusez-moi, Monsieur, est-ce qu'il serait possible d'avoir un verre d'eau, s'il vous plaît ?** = Excuse me Sir, would it be possible to have a glass water, please ?

OR

**Excusez-moi, Monsieur, est-ce que je pourrais avoir un verre d'eau, s'il vous plaît ?** = Excuse me Sir, could I have a glass of water, please ?



**Note:** at a *café*, you may call a waiter 'Monsieur' or simply say 'S'il vous plaît'. Calling a waiter 'Garçon' has become old fashioned or overrated

(you might still hear some people use the term 'Garçon' but it is now-a-days more customary and up to date simply to say 'S'il vous plaît').

#### An example

Imagine you are in an unfamiliar city and you are supposed to meet someone at a *café*. You're lost and you see someone who has a map of the city and a mobile phone. You need help and you wish to look at that person's map and you wish to use their phone to warn your friend that you will be late. How would you approach this person?

En français:



Translation:

**Vous:** Excusez-moi, Monsieur, mais je suis un peu perdue et je cherche le *café* 'La Boussole'.

Est-ce que vous le connaissez ?  
**Le monsieur :** Non, je suis désolé.

**Vous :** Est-ce que ça vous dérangerait si je regardais votre plan une petite minute s'il vous plaît ?

**Le monsieur :** Non, bien sûr, je vous en prie !

**Vous :** Merci ! Aussi, est-ce que je pourrais utiliser votre téléphone deux petites secondes pour appeler mon ami qui m'attend ?

**Le monsieur :** Allez-y !

**Vous:** Merci beaucoup, Monsieur ! C'est très gentil !!

**You :** Excuse me, Sir but I'm a bit lost and I'm looking for the *café* 'La Boussole'\* – do you know it ?

**The man:** No, I'm sorry.

**You:** Would you mind if I looked at your map for just a minute please?

**The man:** of course not, here you go!

**You:** Thank you! could I use your telephone 2 seconds to call my friend who is waiting for me?

**The man:** go ahead!

**You:** Thank you very much, Sir! That's very kind!



\*A "boussole" = a compass.

**Note:** You might hear 'Je vous en prie' in different situations! It is usually said to express 'You're welcome' when someone has said 'Thank you', but it can also be used to express 'Please' or 'Here you go'. If you're waiting in line at the supermarket and someone wants to offer you to go in front of them, they might say to you, 'Je vous en prie'!



**Bonjour! Au revoir!**

When you walk into a boutique or a small shop in France, the people in the place will acknowledge you by saying 'Bonjour' or 'Bonsoir' (evening time). Of course, in return you should do the same. If you walk into a place filled with women only, you could say 'Bonjour Mesdames', in a place filled with men and women 'Bonjour Mesdames et Messieurs'. (or simply "Messieurs-dames") If you're facing one person only, it is customary to say 'Bonjour Monsieur' or 'Bonjour Madame', if you're greeting a younger female person (18 years or less), you should say 'Bonjour Mademoiselle'.

When you leave a shop or a restaurant – you should always automatically say 'au revoir' or "bonne journée" or "bonne soirée" (evening time).

Les bises (kisses on the cheeks): Each time you run into someone you know or even if you're meeting that person for the first time and if you're a woman, you should be prepared to give from 2 to 4 bises (depending on your location in France) to the other person (male or female) on their cheeks. The French person in question will more than likely initiate the action. If you're a man, you should also be ready to give *les bises* to a woman but normally you would shake hands with another man.

**A very useful book**

Here is an excellent book about the spelling particularities of commonly used words, French grammar, and the precise meaning of problematic words. It has lots of very useful examples and cartoons, such as the one on the right: "Même pour le père Noël, ramasser une bûche, c'est dur!" (Even for Santa, falling down is hard), which



illustrates another meanings of the word "bûche": a log of wood. Don't ask us why, but getting a "bûche", means that you fall down. But I can tell you why Santa is involved in this example: the "bûche de Noël" is the traditional French dessert for Christmas – which has the shape of a... log!

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**Guide pratique du français sans fautes**

Editions Selection du Reader's Digest, 2006, 39,90 €.

**The "dictée" of the month**

One of the best exercises to help you improve your writing skills in French is to do a "dictée" (dictation) where you write down as accurately as you can a passage that is read to you by someone. You then check to see if you made any mistakes, in view of avoiding making the same ones the next time. If you click on the audio link below, you will be able to listen to the passage that will be read at a

moderate rate and with each sentence repeated twice. You can, of course, listen to the recording as many times as you like, but we recommend that you try and limit yourselves to two repetitions.

When you have finished, you can compare your version to the original on page 25!



Cartoon by Eric Vrigneau.

**Le coin des branchés****Clope**

**une clope** – a cigarette, a fag. *T'as pas une clope ?* = Do you have a cigarette ?

But with the forthcoming restriction on smoking in public places in France, you had best make sure you smoke your *clopes* outside.

**Cuit**

**cuit** – normally the word *cuit* means "cooked", but in a slang sense it can mean to be done for or all washed up. It can also mean "sloshed" or "drunk." *Il est complètement cuit* = He really sloshed, pissed.

**une cuite** – related to the above. *Il a pris une sacrée cuite* = He really got plastered.

**Encaisser**

**encaisser** – to collect or receive payment or cash a check. In sports, the expression is often used to describe having a goal scored against a team. *Malgré sa domination pendant la plupart du match, la France a, malheureusement, encaissé un but à la 67<sup>e</sup> minute du match contre l'Ecosse.*

**Gamin(e)**

**un(e) gamin(e)** – a kid, child. The word **môme** is also used. *Avec trois gamins de moins de 4 ans, elle ne fait que changer des couches* = With three kids under four years of age, she does nothing but change diapers.

**Magouille**

**magouiller/magouille** -- to scheme ; wheeling and dealing. *Il a magouillé avec l'argent du peuple* = He used public money in a dubious (illegal) way. *Ca sent la magouille* = Something smells fishy.

**Plaque**

**être à côté de la plaque** – to be wide of the mark, totally out of it. *Elle est à côté de la plaque* = She hasn't got a clue.

**Ric-rac**

**ric-rac** - *Ca va se jouer ric-rac* = It's going to be touch and go. *J'ai eu mon train ric-rac* = I barely made my train.

**Rond**

**(un) rond** – as an adjective, *rond*, means, of course, "round". It can also refer to a round number : *Ca fait 50 euros tout rond* = That will be exactly 50 euros. As a noun, *un rond* is often used to signify money. *avoir des ronds* = to be loaded. *Il n'a plus un rond* = He no longer has a penny to his name. And then there is also *un rond de serviette* = a napkin ring. *Etre complètement rond* = to be completely drunk.



*Est-il complètement cuit, ou complètement rond?*

Roger Stevenson