

Unit 17 - Present participles

1 Formation

The **present participle** is formed by taking the stem of the first person plural of the present indicative and adding *-ant*.

nous *aimons* → aimant - *liking*
nous *finissons* → finissant - *finishing*
nous *rendons* → rendant- *giving back*

Exceptions include :

être → étant - *being*
avoir → ayant - *having*
savoir → sachant - *knowing*

It is also used to form the **compound present participle**, sometimes called the **perfect participle**. Here the present participle of the auxiliary *avoir* or *être* is used with the past participle :

ayant fini - *having finished*
étant arrivé - *having arrived*

2 Verbal use

2.1 When used verbally, the present participle describes an action or process whose time is simultaneous with or prior to that expressed by the main clause verb. It is **invariable**, that is it does not alter for number or gender :

Se sentant fatiguée, Marie est rentrée à la maison
*i.e. Marie goes home **while** feeling tired*

Arrivant au cinéma une demi-heure en avance, Pierre est allé prendre un café
*i.e. Pierre goes to get a coffee **after** arriving early*

The compound present participle describes an action or process which is completed prior to the time expressed by the verb in the main clause. Here too the present participle is invariable, although the past participle is not :

Marie, **s'étant assise** dans un fauteil, commença à lui raconter l'histoire
*i.e. Marie begins her story **after** sitting down*

2.2 Because the present participle is a nonfinite verb form (that is to say it cannot be conjugated) it is said to stand within a **nonfinite clause**. It generally serves to abbreviate two types of finite clause. A relative clause :

Les enfants, **dormant dans la chambre d'en face**, ne se sont pas réveillés
(=qui dormaient dans la chambre d'en face)
The children, sleeping in the room opposite, didn't wake up

And an adverbial clause :

Étant fatigué, j'ai décidé d'aller me coucher
(=Comme j'étais fatigué)
(As I was) feeling tired, I decided to go to bed

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2.3 In more formal French the present participle can have its own subject, in which case its clause (known as a **participial clause**) is always separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma. This is much more common in French than in English, and generally expresses a sense of cause :

Son prochain client **étant** en retard, il a décidé d'écrire une lettre
As his next client was late, he decided to write a letter

3 Use as a gerund

3.1 Where the present participle is preceded by *en* (e.g. *en travaillant*), this form is known as a **gerund**. This contrasts with the English gerund form, which refers to the *-ing* form used as a noun (e.g. *he likes skiing*).

3.2 Like the present participle, the gerund is invariable and describes an action or process the time of which is simultaneous with that expressed by the verb in the main clause.

Elle s'est cassé la jambe **en faisant** du ski - *She broke her leg whilst skiing*

3.3 With the gerund, the subject is always the same as the subject of the verb in the main clause. This is different from the present participle which can have a different subject from that of the main clause verb. Compare, for example :

J'ai vu Marie **en sortant** du bureau de poste
I saw Marie while (I was) coming out of the post office
J'ai vu Marie **sortant** du bureau de poste
I saw Marie (who was) coming out of the post office

3.4 The gerund can be used to express a variety of notions :

- **manner**

Il entra dans la salle **en souriant** - *He came into the room smiling*

- **cause**

Il s'est cassé la jambe **en jouant** au football - *He broke his leg playing football*

- **time**

Veillez vous adresser à l'accueil **en arrivant** - *Please go to reception on arriving*

- **condition**

En utilisant cette méthode de paiement vous ferez d'importantes économies
In using this method of payment you will make considerable savings

- **concession**

En prenant la route la plus longue, il est tout de même arrivé le premier
Despite taking the longer route he still arrived first

3.5 Adding the adverb *tout* can serve to emphasize the simultaneity of the actions expressed the participle and the main clause verb :

Tout en me parlant, elle faisait le repassage
All the while she was talking to me she was doing the ironing

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It can also create the notion of opposition :

Tout en prenant la route la plus longue, il est arrivé le premier
Despite taking the longer route he still arrived first

Or concession :

Tout en comprenant ses arguments, je ne suis pas d'accord avec son projet
Whilst I understand his arguments, I do not agree with his plan

- 3.6** Note the use of the gerund to express a manner of motion which in English can be wholly contained in the main clause verb :

Il traversa la rue **en courant** - *He ran across the road*

4 Adjectival use

- 4.1** When used as an adjective, the present participle serves to describe a quality rather than an action or process. In this case it is **variable**, that is to say it **does** alter for number or gender :

C'est une ville **intéressante** - *It's an interesting town*

Ce sont des enfants **charmants** - *They are charming children*

Unlike the present participle, the verbal adjective, like any adjective, cannot take an object. Compare, for example :

Ce sont des filles **obéissantes** - *They are obedient girls*

(= verbal adjective)

Les filles, **obéissant** à leur mère, sont rentrées de très bonne heure

(= present participle)

The girls, obeying their mother, went home very early

- 4.2** In certain rare cases the spelling of the verbal adjective is different to that of the present participle. Compare, for example :

C'est un travail **fatigant** - *It's tiring work*

(= verbal adjective)

Ce travail, bien que me **fatiguant** beaucoup, m'apporte d'énormes satisfactions

(= present participle)

This work, although it tires me out, gives me enormous satisfaction

Other examples include :

verbal adjective

navigant

convaincant

différent

précédent

excellent

adhérent

précédent

present participle

naviguant

convainquant

différant

précédant

excellant

adhérant

précédant

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5 Translating the English *-ing* form

Note that the English *-ing* form does not always correspond to the French *-ant* form.

- 5.1 The continuous or progressive verb forms in English (for example *I am doing, she was saying* etc.) are translated by the equivalent simple form in French (there is no form denoting continuous aspect in French). For example :

Where is Peter ? He **is playing** tennis with Paul
*Où est Pierre ? Il **joue** au tennis avec Paul*

- 5.2 After prepositions, French often uses the infinitive where English uses the present participle :

He left **without saying** a word He turned out all the lights **before leaving**
*Il est parti **sans dire** un mot Il a éteint toutes les lumières **avant de partir***

- 5.3 When a verb is governed by another verb (as with semi-auxiliaries), French always uses an infinitive in situations where English uses a present participle :

We like **going** for a walk on Sunday afternoons
*Nous aimons bien **faire** une promenade le dimanche après-midi*

- 5.4 When an English clause containing the present participle has the sense of a relative clause, it is generally translated by an infinitive or a relative clause in French :

I heard Pierre **singing** in the bath
*J'entendais Pierre **chanter** / **qui chantait** dans son bain*

For verbs of position, the English *-ing* form is often translated by the French past participle :

I saw the child **kneeling** on the floor
*J'ai vu l'enfant **agenouillé** sur le sol*

The present participle seems to be more acceptable in French when the subordinate verb expresses a momentary rather than a continuous action :

I saw Marie **coming** out of / **arriving** at the post office
*J'ai vu Marie **sortant** du / **arrivant** au bureau de poste*

- 5.5 The English gerundive can be translated in various ways such as using a subordinate clause or a noun phrase :

She undoubtedly benefited from his **being there**
*Elle a sans aucun doute profité **du fait qu'il était là** / **de ce qu'il était là** / **de sa présence***

- 5.6 When the *-ing* form is used with *after*, French uses *après* + past infinitive :

After **checking** that all the windows were shut, he went back home
*Après **avoir vérifié** que toutes les fenêtres étaient fermées, il est rentré chez lui*
After **arriving** at the restaurant, we first had an aperitif
*Après **être arrivés** au restaurant, nous avons d'abord pris l'apéritif*

In fact the past infinitive is used wherever the English *-ing* form can be replaced by a perfect participle (*having* + past participle) :

Now he regrets **saying** / **having said** that he didn't want to come
*Maintenant il regrette **d'avoir dit** qu'il ne voulait pas venir*