THE NON-PERSONAL VERB FORMS IN FRENCH AND THEIR PARTICULARITIES OF USE WITH PREPOSITIONS

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Abstract

This article provides a detailed analysis of the stylistic norms governing the use of non-personal verb forms in French: the Infinitive, the Present Participle, and the Past Participle. It focuses critically on the strict prepositional requirements, particularly the distinction between *à* and *de* when linking the Infinitive to preceding verbs, nouns, and adjectives. Mastery of these forms and their specific prepositions is essential for achieving conciseness, grammatical rigor, and native-like stylistic clarity in advanced French writing and speaking.

Keywords: French Grammar, Infinitive, Participle, Gerund, Prepositions *à* and *de*, Stylistics, Non-Personal Verbs.

French grammar distinguishes between personal verb forms, which change according to the subject (conjugation), and non-personal forms, which remain constant regardless of the person.

These non-personal forms—the Infinitive, the Present Participle, and the Past Participle—are far more than just dictionary entries or tools for compound tenses. They are the essential building blocks for creating concise, complex, and stylistically sophisticated sentence structures.

Crucially, the usage of the non-personal forms, particularly the Infinitive, is inextricably linked to specific prepositions, primarily *à* and *de*. The correct choice of preposition is governed by the preceding verb, noun, or adjective and is a hallmark of native-like fluency. A single error in this choice can render an otherwise perfect sentence stylistically incorrect. This guide provides a detailed analysis of the stylistic norms governing these non-personal forms and their prepositional requirements.

The Infinitive (L'Infinitif) and the Prepositional Triptych

The Infinitive is the most frequently used non-personal form. When it functions as the complement or object of another word, it must follow one of three patterns: no preposition, the preposition *à*, or the preposition *de*.

A significant group of verbs, often functioning as auxiliaries or semi-modals, connect directly to the Infinitive without any intervening preposition. Stylistically, this creates a sense of immediate, direct action.

Common Verbs (Non-Exhaustive List):
Modal/Auxiliary: *pouvoir* (can), *devoir* (must/have to), *vouloir* (want), *savoir* (know how to), *falloir* (it is necessary).
Perception: *écouter* (listen to), *entendre* (hear), *sentir* (feel), *voir* (see), *regarder* (watch).
Movement: *aller* (go), *venir* (come), *rentrer* (return), *descendre* (descend).
Causative/Permission: *faire* (make/have done), *laisser* (let/allow).

Category	Example (French)	Example (English)	Stylistic Note
Modal	*Nous **voulons** partir.*	We want to leave.	Essential for expressing desires and obligations.
Perception	*J'ai **vu** la voiture arriver.*	I saw the car arrive.	The second verb is the object of perception.
Causative	*Je **fais** réparer mon vélo.*	I am having my bike fixed.	*Faire* + Infinitive is a key causative structure.

The preposition *à* often implies movement *toward* an action, a state of intention, or the means/difficulty in achieving a result. It sets up the Infinitive as the goal of the initial verb.
Common Verbs:
*apprendre **à*** (learn to)
*commencer **à*** (begin to)
*encourager **à*** (encourage to)
*réussir **à*** (succeed in)
*aider **à*** (help to)
*inviter **à*** (invite to)
*hésiter **à*** (hesitate to)

Function	Example (French)	Stylistic Implication
Intention/Goal	*Il **cherche à** comprendre.*	He is actively seeking to understand.
Beginning/Habit	*Elle **s'habitue à** se lever tôt.*	She is getting used to getting up early.
Difficulty	*C'est **difficile à** faire.*	It is difficult to do.

The preposition *de* typically implies movement *away* from a state, the source or origin of an action, or the conclusion of a thought process (like deciding or regretting).

Common Verbs:
*cesser **de*** (stop/cease)
*décider **de*** (decide to)
*dire **de*** (tell to)
*essayer **de*** (try to)
*finir **de*** (finish)
*refuser **de*** (refuse to)
*se souvenir **de*** (remember)
*venir **de*** (have just done)

Function	Example (French)	Stylistic Implication
Conclusion/Separation	*J'ai **décidé de** rester.*	I have reached the conclusion (decision) to stay.
Regret/Fear	*Elle **craint de** se tromper.*	She fears making a mistake.
Recent Past	*Nous **venons de** manger.*	We have just eaten.

The prepositional rules also extend to nouns and adjectives governing an infinitive:

Nouns requiring *DE*: *l'idée de* (the idea of), *le temps de* (the time to), *la peur de* (the fear of).

Adjectives requiring *DE*: *content de* (happy to), *triste de* (sad to), *capable de* (capable of).

Adjectives requiring *À*: *prêt à* (ready to), *seul à* (alone in), *le premier à* (the first to).

Participles and the Gerund: Expressing Aspect

While the infinitive focuses on the action itself, the participles and the gerund focus on the *aspect* of the action—whether it is ongoing or completed—and how it relates to the main clause.

Formed by dropping the *–ons* from the *nous* form of the present tense and adding *–ant* (e.g., *nous parlons* \rightarrow *parlant*).

The Present Participle is stylistically used in formal writing to replace a relative clause (a *qui* clause), significantly tightening the prose. It is invariable (does not agree).

Stylistically Clumsy	Stylistically Refined (Participle)
J'ai rencontré des personnes qui vivent* en ville.	*J'ai rencontré des personnes **vivant** en ville.* (People living in the city.)
La loi qui permet* le vote est récente.	*La loi **permettant** le vote est récente.* (The law permitting the vote.)

When the Present Participle is used as a pure adjective, describing a noun, it **must** agree in gender and number. This distinction is a key stylistic indicator of precise written French.

*un film **divertissant*** (an entertaining film)

*des histoires **passionnantes*** (passionate/exciting stories)

The Gerund is the structure *en* + Present Participle, and it is a powerful stylistic tool used adverbially to express conditions, means, or simultaneity. The Gerund is **invariable**.

Stylistic Function	Example (French)	Meaning
Manner/Means	*Il a réussi **en travaillant** dur.*	He succeeded **by working** hard.
Simultaneity	*J'écoute la radio **en conduisant**.*	I listen to the radio **while driving**.
Condition	**En agissant** ainsi, vous perdrez.	**By acting** that way, you will lose.

Stylistic Constraint: The Gerund usually requires the subject of the main verb and the Gerund action to be the same.

Beyond its role in forming compound tenses, the Past Participle is often used absolutely or adjectivally. The complex rules of agreement are non-negotiable for polished style.

Used in written style to indicate a completed action preceding the main clause, again offering conciseness.

***L'examen réussi**, il est parti en vacances.* (The exam having been passed, he went on vacation.)

Stylistically, *après* (after) cannot be followed directly by an infinitive. It requires the compound form of the infinitive (*avoir* or *être* in the infinitive + the Past Participle).

Stylistically Correct: *Après **avoir fini** le travail, je suis rentré.* (After having finished the work, I went home.)

Stylistically Incorrect: *Après finir le travail...*

Compare this to *avant* (before), which is correctly followed by the simple infinitive: *Avant **de finir** le travail...*

Essential Prepositional Phrases and Idiomatic Usage

Many verbs, nouns, and adjectives form idiomatic phrases with the prepositions *à* and *de* before an infinitive, which must be memorized to achieve native style.

This category clarifies the relationship between a characteristic (adjective) and the action (infinitive).

Adjective + Preposition	Meaning	Example
facile à	easy to	*C'est **facile à** comprendre.*
difficile à	difficult to	*Le problème est **difficile à** résoudre.*
fier de	proud to	*Je suis **fier** d'**être Français*.
heureux de	happy to	*Nous sommes **heureux de** vous voir.*
obligé de	obliged to	*Il est **obligé de** partir.*

The noun dictates the preposition, defining the nature (intention, means, need) of the subsequent action.

Noun + Preposition	Meaning	Example
le moyen de	the means/way to	*Trouver **le moyen de** voyager.*
la manière de	the manner of	*J'aime **sa manière de** parler.*
le besoin de	the need to	*J'ai **besoin de** dormir.*
le droit de	the right to	*Ils ont **le droit de** voter.*
l'autorisation de	the authorization to	*Donner **l'autorisation de** filmer.*

Impersonal verbs, which only exist in the third person singular (*il*), universally use the Infinitive linked by *de* or no preposition at all.

No Preposition: *Il **faut** travailler.* (It is necessary to work.)

With *DE*: *Il **vaut mieux ne pas** attendre.* (It is better not to wait.)

With *DE*: *Il **est important de** noter...* (It is important to note...)

This structure (*Il est + Adjective + de + Infinitive*) is a hallmark of academic and formal French, offering an objective, general statement.

The non-personal verb forms are indispensable for constructing elegant, non-repetitive, and concise French sentences. Mastery of their usage, especially the strict rules governing the prepositions *à* and *de*, moves the learner beyond basic sentence construction into the realm of advanced composition.

The critical stylistic norms to internalize are: the correct linking of the Infinitive based on the preceding verb/noun/adjective; the use of the Present Participle for conciseness in formal prose; and the correct application of *en* + Participle (the Gerund) to express manner or simultaneity.

By ensuring grammatical rigor in these areas, speakers and writers can achieve the clarity and stylistic coherence characteristic of the most refined French expression.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that non-personal verb forms in French—the Infinitive, the Present Participle, the Gerund, and the Past Participle—constitute a highly structured and stylistically significant element of the language. Their correct use is not limited to grammatical accuracy; rather, it defines the clarity, conciseness, and expressive precision of advanced written and spoken French. Central to their functioning is the strict system of prepositional governance, particularly the complementary roles of *à* and *de*, which determine the semantic orientation of the infinitive toward intention, obligation, separation, or completion.

The analysis highlights that errors in prepositional choice, agreement of participles, or improper substitution of relative clauses with participial constructions significantly reduce stylistic authenticity and mark a deviation from established norms of academic or formal French. Likewise, mastery of constructions such as *en + participe présent*, causative structures like *faire + infinitif*, or fixed adjective–preposition and noun–preposition patterns is essential for achieving fluency comparable to native usage.

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