

Position of French Adverbs

Je prends toujours une tasse de thé le matin.
I always have a cup of tea in the morning.

LESSON

What is it?

Adverbs consist of invariable words modifying another element in a sentence or the whole sentence itself. They are placed differently in the sentence according to the element they modify or the intended meaning of the sentence.

What is it like in English?

In English, adverbs are also invariable but their position does not always follow the same pattern as in French.

He **often** sings. He sings **often**. → *Il chante souvent. Souvent, il chante.*

Note the place of 'often' in the above example. In English, it is placed before or after the conjugated verb but not in French.

What is it like in French?

The placement of an adverb is dependent on its function in the sentence and the meaning it wants to convey.

1. The adverb modifies one element of the sentence.

- a. The adverb is directly placed **in front** of the adjective, adverb or noun phrase it modifies.

This is the same pattern as in English:

Elle est très rapide (= adjective). → She is **very** quick.

Elle comprend très rapidement (= adverb). → She understands **very** quickly.

Ce pull te va vraiment à merveille (= noun phrase). → This jumper **really** suits you.

- b. When modifying a verb, the adverb can have **different locations** around the verbal phrase:

- With simple tense verbs, it is placed **after the verb or after its object**.

Je lis souvent le journal. = *Je lis le journal souvent.* → I **often** read the newspaper.

- With verbs in compound tenses (*passé composé...*) or conjugated verbs followed by an infinitive, the adverb is placed **between the conjugated verb and its past participle or the infinitive**:

Je suis bien arrivé. → I got there **alright**.

On devrait toujours refuser. → We should **always** say no.

Watch out! Adverbs indicating a place or location cannot be placed between the verb and its past participle. They are placed after it.

Elle a habité ici. → She lived **here**.

- Adverbs indicating time or frequency are placed **at the beginning or end of a sentence**.

Vous partirez demain. = *Demain, vous partirez.*

→ You will leave **tomorrow**. = **Tomorrow**, you will leave.

Elle mange quatre fois par jour. = *Quatre fois par jour, elle mange.*

→ She eats **four times a day**.

- The place of the adverb is sometimes **meaning dependent**.

*Elle ne travaille **toujours** pas. ≠ Elle ne travaille pas **toujours**.*

→ She **still** does not work. ≠ She does not **always** work.

2. The adverb modifies the whole sentence.

- a. It can be **at the beginning, middle or end of a sentence**.

*L'avion a atterri, **sans doute**. = **Sans doute**, l'avion a atterri. = L'avion a **sans doute** atterri.*

→ The plane has **probably** landed.

- b. Adverbs expressing a way of speaking are, like in English, placed **at the beginning of the sentence**: *sérieusement* (seriously), *franchement* (honestly), *honnêtement* (frankly), *en résumé* (in short), etc.

***Sérieusement**, tu pars ? → **Seriously**, are you leaving?*

≠ *Parle-moi **sérieusement** ! → Talk to me **in a serious manner**.*

Note the difference of meaning here when the adverb changes places.

- c. In formal written French, a small group of sentence-initial adverbs can be followed by the inversion:

- Subject-verb inversion with pronouns (*peut-être*, *sans doute*, *à peine*, *toujours*, *ainsi*, *encore*, *de même*, *probablement*, *aussi*, *à plus forte raison*, etc.) are placed **at the beginning of a sentence**. Note that the inversion does not modify the meaning of the sentence which remains a statement and is not a question.

***Peut-être** ai-je raison, **peut-être** ai-je tort. → I **may** be right, I **may** be wrong.*

***À peine** était-il arrivé qu'on lui demanda de travailler. → **Hardly** had he arrived when he was asked to work.*

***Encore** faut-il qu'elle accepte. → She would have to accept.*

Note that in spoken French, you can use *peut-être que* and *sans doute que* instead of the inversion:

***Peut-être que** j'ai raison, **peut-être que** j'ai tort. → I **may** be right, I **may** be wrong.*

- Subject-verb inversion with nouns: placed **at the beginning of the sentence**, adverbs of time and place may be followed by the inversion if the meaning allows it. This rare device is mainly used in literature and in formal French.

« ***Voici d'abord** les soldats [...] **Enfin**, suivent les porteurs innombrables [...]. »*

→ “**First** the soldiers [...] **Finally**, countless porteurs [...]”

Léopold Courouble, *En plein soleil*, 1900.

EXERCISES

1 Underline all the subject-verb inversions in the following sentences and rewrite them without the inversion (make the necessary transpositions).

- a. Ainsi s'acheva la guerre. →
- b. Sans doute recevrez-vous une réponse sans tarder. →
- c. Encore faut-il qu'il y ait de l'eau. →
- d. Probablement avaient-ils déjà répondu quand la cloche sonna.
→
- e. Bientôt sifflèrent les sirènes. →
- f. Dehors défilaient les soldats. →
- g. Ainsi passaient les jours et les années. →

2 Fill in the gaps using the following adverbs:

finalement • fort • beaucoup • vraiment • presque jamais • sans doute • assez • trop • surtout • quand même • bizarrement

Les enfants sages : on ne les entend et, , dans une dynamique de groupe, on ne s'appuie pas sur eux. Bien que effacés, ils ont un rôle à jouer. Cela peut enrichir le groupe et les aider dans leur développement. , comme tous les enfants, ils ont à donner.

3 Translate the following sentences into French, giving all the possibilities in terms of adverb placement.

- a. He is really very quick.
→
- b. They often used to go to Nice for the winter.
→
- c. I rarely watch TV.
→
- d. I've put the picture there.
→
- e. You haven't replied to my email yet.
→
- f. The managers still do not understand.
→
- g. My dog does not always bark like this.
→
- h. She won the race, apparently!
→
- i. I never drink.
→

4 Free writing: Write a couple of sentences describing the opposite of a perfectly behaved child, using some adverbs.

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