

French influence

Kron

- English has borrowed so many words from the French that someone once half-seriously claimed that English is little more than French badly pronounced.
- Some of these words have kept their original spelling, while others have become so Anglicized you may not recognize them as originally French.
- Nearly half of English French borrowings came into English before the 19th century; thereafter, the adaptations tended to be of a more literal nature.
- However, a little bit of French goes a long way; its overuse can make the speaker or writer seem affected and pretentious.
- But French terms can lend both elegance and precision to your self-expression, as well as a certain charm, or what the French call *je ne sais quoi* (literally „I don't know what“) – an indefinable stylish quality that enhances your presentation of yourself.

French borrowings used in contemporary English:

1. **avant-garde** (ə vānt'gārd', ə vant'-, av'ānt-, ä'vānt-) the advance group in any field, especially in the visual, literary, or musical arts, whose works are unorthodox and experimental.

2. **bon vivant** (bon'vē vānt', bôn'vē vān') a person who lives luxuriously and enjoys good food and drink.
3. **cause célèbre** (kôz'sə leb', -leb'rə) any controversy that attracts great public attention.
4. **coup d'état** (kōō' dā tā') a sudden and decisive action in politics, especially one effecting a change of government, illegally or by force.
5. **cul-de-sac** (kul'də sak') a street, lane, etc., closed at one end; blind alley.
6. **demimonde** (dem' ē mond') a group that has lost status or lacks respectability.
7. **envoy** (en'voi, än'-) a diplomatic agent; an accredited messenger or representative.
8. **esprit de corps** (e sprē' də kôr') a sense of union and of common interests and responsibilities, as developed among a group of persons associated together.
9. **idée fixe** (ē' dā fēks') a fixed idea; obsession.
10. **joie de vivre** (zhwä'də vēv', vē'vrə) a delight in being alive.
11. **laissez-faire** (les'ā fār') the theory that government should intervene as little as possible in economic affairs.
12. **milieu** (mil yōō', mēl-) an environment; medium.
13. **rapport** (ra pôr', rə-) a harmonious or sympathetic relationship or connection.
14. **rendezvous** (rän'də vōō', -dā-) an agreement between two or more people to meet at a certain time and place.
15. **repartee** (rep'ər tē', -tā', -är-) witty conversation; a quick reply.

1. **agent provocateur** (ā'jənt prə vok'ə tûr', tōor') outside agitator.
2. **chic** (shēk) attractive and fashionable in style; stylish.
3. **connoisseur** (kon'ə sûr', -sōor') a person who is especially competent to pass critical judgments in art or in matters of taste.
4. **decolletage** (dā'kol tätzh') the neckline of a dress cut low in the front or back and often across the shoulders.
5. **éminence grise** (ā mē nāns grēz') a person who exercises power unofficially and surreptitiously.
6. **en masse** (än mas') as a group.
7. **mêlée** (mā'lā, mā lā') a confused, general hand-to-hand fight.
8. **pièce de résistance** (pyes də rā zē stāns') showpiece; principal object or event.
9. **poseur** (pôzûr') a person who attempts to impress others by assuming or affecting a manner, degree of elegance, etc.
10. **protégé** (prō'tə zhā', prō'tə zhā') a person under the patronage or care of someone influential who can further his or her career.

11. **raconteur** (rak'on tûr', -tōor') a person who is skilled in relating anecdotes.
12. **riposte** (ri pōst') a quick, sharp retort; retaliation.
13. **saboteur** (sab'ə tûr') a person who deliberately destroys property, obstructs services, or undermines a cause.
14. **tour de force** (tōor'də fōrs') an exceptional achievement using the full skill, ingenuity, and resources of a person, country, or group.
15. **vis-à-vis** (vē'zə vē') face to face; opposite; in relation to.

arriviste (ar'ē vēst') a person who has recently acquired wealth or status; up-start.

au courant (ō' kōō rāN') up-to-date; fully aware; cognizant.

au fait (ō fe') well-versed; expert; experienced.

beau monde (bō' mond', -môNd') the fashionable world; high society.

bête noir (bāt' nwär') pet peeve; annoyance.

bonhomie (bon'ə mē', bō'nə-) good nature; geniality.

bon mot (bôn mō') clever turn of phrase; witticism.

cachet (ka shā') superior status; prestige; a distinguishing feature.

canaille (kə nī', -nāl') the common people; rabble.

carte blanche (kärt' blänch', blänsh') full authority or access; unconditional authority.

causerie (kō'zə rē') informal conversation; chat.

comme il faut (kô mēl f o') as it should be; proper; appropriate.

contretemps (kon'trə täN') mishap; inconvenience.

coterie (kō'tə rē) a group of close associates; exclusive group or clique.

coup de grâce (kōō' də gräs') final blow; a finishing or decisive stroke.

déclassé (dā'kla sā', -klä-) reduced to or having low status.

denouement (dā'nōō mǎN') resolution or outcome, especially of a story.

de rigueur (də ri gūr', -rē) strictly according to the rules; required.

dernier cri (dern'yā krē') the last word; the ultimate; latest fashion.

detritus (di trī'təs) debris; rubbish.

de trop (də trō') too much or too many; unwanted; in the way.

divertissement (di vūr'tis mǎnt; *Fr.* dē ver tēs -mǎN') a diversion or entertainment.

doyen (doi en'; *Fr.* dwa yaN') the senior member of a group or profession;
a leader or ultimate authority in a field.

echelon (esh'ə lon') a level of authority, rank, or command.

éclat (ā klā') flair, dash; brilliance; showy or elaborate display; acclaim or
acclamation.

élan (ā lān', ā lāN') vivacity; verve.

enfant terrible (*Fr.* än fän te rē'bl^ə) irresponsible person; unconventional or
shocking person; incorrigible child.

engagé (*Fr.* äN gA zhā') politically committed; involved in a cause.

ennui (än wē') boredom; a sense of weariness and discontent.

en passant (än' pa sän', äN') in passing; by the way.

fracas (frā'kəs, frak'əs) noisy disturbance; disorderly fight.

fait accompli (*Fr.* fe tA kôN plē') accomplished act; done deal.

gaffe (gaf) blunder; faux pas.

gaucherie (gō'shə rē') awkwardness; vulgarity.

Grand Guignol (*Fr.* grÄN gē nyôl') a drama emphasizing horror or sensationalism.

habitué (hə bich'ōō ā') a frequent visitor to a place; regular client; devotee.

hauteur (hō tûr', ō tûr') snobbishness; aloofness; superior air; haughtiness; arrogance.

ingénue (an'zhə nōō', aN '-) a naive or innocent young woman.

lèse majesty (lēz' maj'ə stē) an attack on a ruler or established authority; an affront to dignity.

maladroit (mal'ə droit') lacking in adroitness; awkward.

mélange (mā läNzh', -länj') mixture; medley.

métier (mā'tyā, mā tyā') vocation or calling; forte.

motif (mō tēf') a recurring theme; a repeated element of design.

mot juste (*Fr.* mō zhyst') precise word; pithy phrase.

mystique (mi stēk') an aura of mystery; a framework of beliefs lending enhanced value or meaning to a person or thing.

nom de guerre (nom' də gâr') an assumed name; pseudonym; stage name; alias.

nouveau riche (nōō'vō rēsh') a newly rich person, especially one who is ostentatious or uncultivated.

parvenu (pär'və nōō', -nyōō') newcomer; upstart.

précis (prā sē', prā'sē) a short, concise summary.

penchant (pen'chənt) a strong inclination, taste, or liking for something.

pied-à-terre (pē ā'də târ') a part-time or temporary residence.

rapprochement (rap'rōsh män') an establishment or renewal of friendly relations.

recherché (rə shâr'shā) esoteric or obscure; select or rare; mannered or affected.

risqué (ri skā') racy, indelicate, or suggestive.

sang-froid (*Fr.* sän frwā') self-possession; composure; calmness or equanimity.

savoir-faire (sav'wär fâr') know-how; tact; social polish.

soigné (swän yā') well-groomed; carefully or elegantly done.

succès d'estime (*Fr.* syk se des tēm') critical success; success achieved by merit rather than popularity.

tête-à-tête (tāt'ə tāt', tet'ə tet') intimate, private conversation.

volte-face (volt fäs', vōlt-) reversal; turnabout; about-face.

Ooh-la-la!

When they invaded Britain in 1066 the Normans brought over their language, and for the next 300 years the kings and nobility of England spoke French. More recently **French** has given us many expressions that can imply sophistication or a certain naughtiness.

THE English view of the French as immoral or sexy goes back a long way (see FRENCH). Since the 1860s we have called something mildly indecent **risqué**, literally 'risked', whereas a word or phrase open to two interpretations, one of which is less innocent than the other, is a **double entendre** or 'double understanding'. A seductive woman who is likely to cause distress to any man who becomes involved with her is a **femme fatale**, or 'fatal woman'.

By the Victorian era the British upper classes had adopted French cooking, and French cooks were **de rigueur** (literally 'in strictness') or obligatory, with the result that French became the language of good eating. Someone who wants to produce food to the standard of **haute cuisine** or 'high cookery' might follow a **cordons bleu** course. The name refers back to the 'blue ribbon' which since the 1820s has marked a first-class cook but before the French Revolution indicated the highest order of chivalry. Ordering **à la carte** is choosing dishes as separate items rather than as a set meal, literally 'according to the menu card'. You may prefer the **prix fixe**, a set meal of several courses served at a 'fixed price', or make do with an **hors d'oeuvre**, a small savoury dish which is literally 'outside the work'. Or you could simply eat an **éclair**, which in French is not only a cream cake but also 'a flash of lightning', 'a flash or glint', or 'a moment'—*un repas éclair* is a quick meal. The cake's name could have been suggested by the fact that its light texture makes it very quick to eat—the word is defined by the *Chambers Dictionary* as 'a cake, long in shape but short in duration'.

The traditional English prejudice against the French, who were not only their nearest rivals but were Catholics to boot, moderated after the fall of Napoleon in 1815, and people took up several French expressions. The best example of a particular type might be described as the **crème de la crème** or 'cream of the cream'. Someone who likes to leave things to follow their own course without interfering follows a policy of **laissez-faire**, from the French for 'allow to do'. If things do not turn out as you hope, you might console yourself with shrugging your shoulders and saying **c'est la vie**, the equivalent of 'that's life', or **plus ça change**—short for **plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose**, 'the more it changes, the more it stays the same', an 1849 quotation by the French novelist and journalist Alphonse Karr (1808–90).

If you give someone complete freedom to act as they wish, you give them **carte blanche**. The literal meaning 'blank paper' carried the idea of a blank

sheet on which to write anything desired, originally the terms of a peace treaty. You would probably not give the opportunity to your **bête noir**—an expression, literally ‘black beast’, for someone you greatly dislike. Originally an **enfant terrible** was, as the name suggests, a ‘terrible child’ who embarrassed its parents with untimely remarks, but it is now a person who behaves in an unconventional or controversial way.

That mainstay of corny sitcoms, the **au pair** is a young foreign girl who helps with housework or childcare in exchange for food and accommodation. She has been around since 1960 or so, but in the 19th century an *au pair* arrangement was one in which each party paid the other in kind, by performing services. The phrase means ‘on equal terms’.

Entrepreneur has been used in English since the 1820s. It first meant ‘a director of a musical institution’ and ‘a person who organizes entertainments’, but later in the 19th century broadened to refer to somebody who runs a business and takes the risks it entails. The US president George W. Bush is said to have proclaimed, ‘The problem with the French is that they don’t have a word for entrepreneur’—a good story but one with no evidence to back it up.

French

English abounds in words of French origin, many dating back to the years following the Norman Conquest, when French first became established as the language of government, law, the church, and public proceedings. Most words introduced at this time have subsequently become fully anglicized (such as *beef, crown, judge, river*), but there are hundreds of words and phrases, mainly those arriving within the last three hundred years or so, that have not been assimilated in this way and that still feel recognizably 'French'.

French is pre-eminently the language of cooking, food, and wine. There are numerous such terms used in kitchens and restaurants on a daily basis. They include *appellation contrôlée, au gratin, bain-marie, béchamel, bistro, bouillabaisse, bouillon, casserole, chanterelle, chef-d'œuvre, compote, cordon bleu, coulis, crème brûlée, croquette, crudités, entrecôte, flambé, gâteau, goujon, haute cuisine, hollandaise, julienne, jus, maître d'hôtel, mangetout, mousse, nouvelle cuisine, petits pois, ragout, ratatouille, roulade, roux, sauté, sommelier, soufflé, tournedos, vinaigrette, and vin de table*. As this list demonstrates, French provides English not only with the names of dishes and styles of cooking but also with the language of food and meals generally. Other examples include *à la carte, aperitif, bon appétit, chef, cuisine, entrée, gourmet, hors d'oeuvre, plat du jour, and restaurateur*.

The vocabulary of art and literature is also richly French.

The vocabulary of art and literature is also rich in French terms: *art nouveau*, *avant-garde*, *beaux arts*, *belles-lettres*, *collage*, *conservatoire*, *coup de théâtre*, *dramaturge*, *entr'acte*, *genre*, *gouache*, *mise en scène*, *objet trouvé*, *œuvre*, *roman-à-clef*, *roman-fleuve*, and *trompe l'oeil*. Ballet terminology owes even more to French: *arabesque*, *barre*, *battement*, *brisé*, *chaîné*, *corps de ballet*, *entrechat*, *fouetté*, *pas de deux*, *pirouette*, *plié*, *port de bras*, *relevé*, *tour en l'air*, and many more. And French contributions to the language of filmmaking include *auteur*, *cinéaste*, *film noir*, *montage*, and *nouvelle vague*.

French terms also crop up in the field of conversation and verbal sparring (*bon mot*, *esprit de l'escalier*, *mot juste*, *riposte*, *touché*) and are indispensable in describing a certain kind of casual confidence or style (*aplomb*, *insouciance*, *nonchalant*, *panache*, *sangfroid*, *savoir faire*). One fascinating group of French borrowings is made up of terms relating to romance, sexual behaviour, and indecency. These include *affaire*, *amour*, *billet-doux*, *cinq-à-sept*, *crime passionnel*, *décolletage*, *double entendre*, *femme fatale*, *grande horizontale*, *liaison*, *ménage à trois*, *risqué*, *roué*, and *soixante-neuf*.

Finally, French has traditionally been the language of diplomacy, hence the prevalence of terms such as *chargé d'affaires*, *communiqué*, *corps diplomatique*, *détente*, and *entente cordiale*.