GENERAL

how to say hi in french

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How to Say Hi in French: A Complete Guide to Greeting in the French Language

Learning how to say hi in French is one of the first steps toward mastering this beautiful and widely spoken language. Whether you're planning a trip to Paris, chatting with French-speaking friends, or simply expanding your linguistic repertoire, knowing the right way to greet people can set the tone for friendly interactions and cultural understanding. In this guide, we'll walk you through the most common ways to say hi, explain when to use each greeting, offer pronunciation tips, and share useful phrases that will help you feel confident and polite in any French-speaking setting.

1. The Classic French Greetings

1.1 Bonjour – The Universal "Good Morning/Good Day"

Bonjour(pronounced "bohn-zhoor") is the most widely recognized French greeting. It literally means "good day" and can be used from morning until around 6 pm. It's appropriate for both formal and informal situations, making it the safest choice when you're unsure of the setting.

- Formal: "Bonjour, Monsieur Dupont."
- Informal: "Bonjour, Marie!"

1.2 Salut – The Casual "Hi"

When you're talking to friends, classmates, or anyone you know well, **salut**(pronounced "sa-lu") is the go-to informal greeting. It's equivalent to "hey" or "hi" in English and is often followed by a friendly wave or a hug.

- Example: "Salut, comment ça va?" – "Hey, how's it going?"

1.3 Bonsoir – The Evening "Good Evening"

From the late afternoon into the night, **bonsoir**(pronounced "bohn-swahr") is the correct greeting. It's used to show politeness and respect for the time of day.

- Formal: "Bonsoir, Madame."
- Informal: "Bonsoir, Thomas."

1.4 Allô – The Phone Greeting

When answering a telephone call in French, you say **allô**(pronounced "ah-loh"). It's similar to "hello" on the phone and is used only in that context.

1.5 Coucou – The Playful "Hi"

For younger audiences or very casual situations, **coucou**(pronounced "koo-koo") is a playful, affectionate way to say hi. Think of it as "hey there!" in a lighthearted tone.

2. Formal vs. Informal Contexts

French culture places a strong emphasis on formality, especially in business or when meeting someone for the first

time. Below is a quick reference guide to help you choose the right greeting based on the level of formality required.

- Formal: Bonjour, Monsieur / Madame / Mademoiselle
- Informal: Salut, bonjour (to friends)
- Phone: Allô
- Evening: Bonsoir

When in doubt, starting with **bonjour**is a safe bet. If the person responds with a more informal greeting, you can follow their lead.

3. Pronunciation Guide

Mastering French pronunciation takes practice, but here are the key sounds you'll need to know for greetings.

3.1 Bonjour

"bohn-zhoor" – The "j" sound is similar to the "s" in "measure." The "ou" is pronounced like the "oo" in "food." The final "r" is guttural and not rolled.

3.2 Salut

"sa-lu" – The "a" is like the "a" in "father." The "u" is a close front rounded vowel, a sound that doesn't exist in English, similar to the German "ü."

3.3 Bonsoir

"bohn-swahr" – The "sw" combination is pronounced as a single sound, and the "r" at the end is again guttural.

3.4 Allô

"ah-loh" – The "a" is a short "ah" sound, and the "o" is a long "oh." The emphasis falls on the first syllable.

3.5 Coucou

"koo-koo" – Both syllables are identical, each with a long "oo" sound.

Practice each greeting out loud, and try listening to native speakers on language learning apps or YouTube videos to refine your accent.

4. Cultural Nuances and Etiquette

French greetings are more than just words; they reflect cultural norms and social etiquette. Here are a few key points to keep in mind.

4.1 The Handshake

In business settings, a firm handshake with eye contact is customary. When greeting someone for the first time, a brief handshake is often followed by a polite "bonjour" or "bonsoir."

4.2 The Cheek Kiss (La Bise)

In informal settings, especially among friends or family, a light cheek kiss (la bise) is common. The number of kisses varies by region: two in most of France, three in the south, and sometimes four in certain parts of Belgium and Switzerland.

4.3 The "Bonjour" of the Street

When walking past someone on the street, you might hear "bonjour" or "salut" from a passerby. It's a polite nod to

the communal spirit of French neighborhoods.

4.4 Avoiding Overly Familiar Greetings with Strangers

Using **salut** or **coucou** with strangers can come across as too informal or even rude. Stick to **bonjour**until you gauge the other person's comfort level.

5. Alternative Phrases for Saying Hi

Below are additional expressions that can enrich your French greetings repertoire.

5.1 Ça va?

While technically a question ("How's it going?"), **ça va?**is often used as a greeting, especially among friends. It can be paired with "salut" or "bonjour."

5.2 Quoi de neuf?

Meaning "What's new?" this phrase is informal and friendly, suitable for peers or acquaintances.

5.3 Bien le bonjour!

Literally "well hello!" it's a more enthusiastic, friendly greeting often used in casual contexts.

5.4 Hello (Anglicism)

In some bilingual contexts, especially in tourist areas, **hello**is understood. However, using French greetings is always appreciated.

6. Greeting a Group or a Crowd

When addressing more than one person, you'll want to use plural forms and polite language.

- Bonjour à tous – "Hello everyone."
- Bonjour les amis – "Good day, friends."
- Bonsoir à tous – "Good evening, everyone."

These phrases are especially useful in business meetings, classroom settings, or social gatherings.

7. Greeting in Different Situations

7.1 At a Café or Restaurant

When you enter a café, the server may say **bonjour** or **salut**to welcome you. Respond politely with the same greeting. If you're ordering, you can say, "Bonjour, je voudrais…" ("Hello, I would like…")

7.2 In a Business Email

Start with a formal greeting: **Bonjour Monsieur / Madame**, followed by a respectful tone throughout the email.

7.3 In a Social Media Post or Text Message

Use **salut** or **bonjour** depending on your relationship with the recipient. For a playful tone, **coucou** works well.

8. How to Respond When Someone Says Hi

Knowing how to reply is just as important as greeting. Here are common responses.

- Bonjour! – Simple and polite.

- Salut! – Matching an informal greeting.
- Ça va? – A friendly question back.
- Merci, et vous? – “Thank you, and you?” (formal).

9. Practice Exercises

Practice is key to mastering greetings. Try these exercises to reinforce what you’ve learned.

9.1 Matching Exercise

1. Match the greeting to the appropriate context.
2. 1. Bonjour – A. When calling someone on the phone
3. 2. Salut – B. When meeting a friend
4. 3. Bonsoir – C. When meeting someone for the first time in the evening
5. 4. Allô – D. When greeting a group in the morning

Answers: 1-C, 2-B, 3-C, 4-A.

9.2 Role Play

Pair up with a friend or language partner. Take turns greeting each other using different levels of formality. For instance, one person says **bonjour** to a stranger, the other replies with **salut** to a friend, and so on.

9.3 Pronunciation Drill

Record yourself saying each greeting and compare it to native speaker samples. Pay special attention to the guttural “r” in **bonjour** and **bonsoir**.

10. Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Using salut with strangers or in formal settings.
- Forgetting to add the appropriate honorific (Monsieur / Madame) when speaking formally.
- Using allô in face to face interactions; it’s reserved for phone calls.
- Mispronouncing the French “r,” which can sound harsh or unintelligible.

Conclusion

Mastering how to say hi in French

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