

## Leaving Certificate French Higher Level Revision Guide

The French Leaving Certificate exam tests the candidates' aural, oral and written French, as well as their comprehension skills. Unlike some subjects, a language cannot be "crammed". A broad knowledge of vocabulary, a solid command of grammar and the ability to communicate in, and understand, the spoken word are essential in order to achieve a high grade. There is little point rote-learning off lists of vocabulary unless the candidate practices identifying these words in a written and aural context as well as using them in their written work. To this end there are plenty of techniques that a pupil can employ in the weeks prior to the exam in order to build their vocabulary, improve their grammatical competence and sharpen their listening and oral skills.

The exam in its entirety is worth 400 marks, with the oral worth 100 of these marks, which equates to 25% of the total marks available at Higher Level. The aural is worth a further 80 marks, namely 20% of the exam; the comprehensions are worth 120 marks or 30%, with the remaining 100 marks, or 25% going for the written tasks. When revising for the French exam it is important to focus on each element in turn, with the knowledge that what you study for one component of the exam, such as the oral, will invariably aid you in another part of the exam.

For many students the **oral test** is arguably the most daunting part of the modern language exam and yet it really need not be so. With oral tests beginning around the country on the 15<sup>th</sup> April this year candidates still have ample time to maximise their marks in this component of the exam. Of the 100 marks available, 20 of these are awarded for pronunciation; 20 for the range of vocabulary used; 30 for grammar and 30 for communication.

The oral takes the form of a conversation, so while it is advisable to prepare a broad range of topics in advance, delivering rote-learned answers in a robotic fashion will not see the candidate score too highly for communication. To this end, the best advice is to prepare answers of reasonable length (more than three sentences, less than a monologue!) on topics including, but not limited to *moi-même; ma famille; ma maison; mon quartier; ma journée typique; mon école; mes loisirs; le weekend; la carrière* and *les vacances*, then practice saying them aloud to anyone who will listen! Students frequently underestimate the importance of practicing their answers aloud, but this is essential to getting good marks. Enlisting the help of a family member or friend, even if that person does not have a word of French, will be of benefit. They can ask the candidate in English to tell them about, for example, their family or their hobbies. The candidate replies in French, with the focus not so much on the accuracy of what is said, rather on improving fluency and the ability to move from one topic to another with ease. It is also important to remember that communication is more than what you say; it includes eye-contact and positive demeanour

A good oral exam will see the student use accurate pronunciation. Recording yourself speaking, then asking your teacher to listen to the recording and pick out pronunciation errors for you to work on will see you maximise your pronunciation marks. Common errors to avoid include: mispronouncing words with a double -l, such as "*famille*" (the double "l" is practically silent, making the

word sound like [fam-ee]); not differentiating between “je” [juh] and “j’ai”; pronouncing the “p” in words such as “*beaucoup*” [beaucou] and “*temps*” [tom].

To increase grammar marks students need to be aware of agreements of adjectives, for example “*Je porte une jupe verte*” (where the “t” in *verte* is pronounced by virtue of the fact that it is followed by an “e”), as well as being very aware of the tense in which they are expected to answer the question. The student can expect to be asked questions that require them to use different tenses when answering. The most important tenses to prepare are the present tense (the majority of the exam will be conducted in the present tense); the past tense, specifically le passé composé (eg. *L’été dernier, je suis allé(e) en vacances avec ma famille*); the future tense (eg. *Après le Bac, j’irai en vacances avec mes amis*) and a few sentences in the conditional tense (eg. *Si je gagnais à la loterie nationale je ferais le tour du monde*). If possible, including a sentence in the subjunctive will also sound very impressive (eg. *Il faut que je fasse beaucoup de devoirs*).

To score well in vocabulary the candidate must demonstrate the ability to use as wide a range of words as possible and avoid the temptation to stick to shorter, simpler words, just because they may be easier to pronounce. An example of this may be where a student, in listing their subjects, decides to say they study *dessin* [dess-an] because it is easier to pronounce than *comptabilité* [kon-ta-bil-e-tay].

Finally, it is advised that students prepare a *document* to bring in to the exam with them. Candidates will be very thankful for having done this “extra work” in the hours before the oral when nerves are running high, as it provides an opportunity to speak uninterrupted for a few minutes about something the pupil has prepared in advance. Good ideas for a document presentation include a photograph of a particular hobby, especially if that hobby involves a uniform or particular dress, such as Irish dancing, karate or boxing. Holiday snaps are also good in that it enables the pupil to use the past tense, all the better if it was a holiday to France! Photos of pets are best avoided unless you have some unique story about how you got that pet, eg. from a rescue shelter, whereby you can broaden the discussion to animal cruelty.

There is a common misconception that a student cannot study for the **aural exam**. This could not be further from the truth. Given that it is weighted at 20% of the Higher Level exam it is certainly worth taking time to flex your aural muscles! Even a student with very competent aural skills would be advised to take the following approach to improving their aural mark.

The most obvious resource available to all students, and their first port of call for improving their aural grade, is the CD that accompanies their exam papers. The vast majority of pupils will be used to listening to past aural exams in class time, with their teacher picking out relevant and important vocabulary. In order to get the most out of the aural work completed in class, the student should then take the time at home to listen back to these same sections, especially if they already have the correct answers. In so doing the pupil will not only become more accustomed to the sound of French, but will also become more competent at identifying vocabulary quickly.

Once this resource has been exhausted the student should avoid the assumption that there is nothing further they can do in preparation for this part

of the Leaving Cert French exam. Any spoken French that the student exposes him/herself to will be of benefit as it will enable them to get the sound of the language on their ear. Students are often intimidated by “real” or authentic listening exercises. There are, however, some easy ways to make such listening exercises more accessible. Take, for example, an authentic news clip from a website such as [www.TV5.org](http://www.TV5.org). On this site students should locate the news programme “7 Jours sur la Planète”, which covers a weekly summary of topical events from around the globe. As with many things in life, a little and often is the best approach for aural work, so by selecting just one of the eight news events and listening to it several times, the candidate can make real strides in improving their listening skills by focusing on very specific tasks. On listening initially the pupil may gain nothing more than a vague awareness of what the news story is about. The student should then set themselves the challenge of picking out any *numbers* they hear in the piece. The same clip can be used several times, with the pupil each time focusing on a different category of vocabulary. Should the student find a news clip pertaining to a natural disaster, such as “Hurricane Sandy” for example, they should pre-empt the listening activity by spending five or ten minutes looking up words they might expect to hear in the clip, such as *l'ouragan* (the hurricane); *le vent* (the wind); *les inondations* (the floods); *détruire* (to destroy); *détruit(e)* (destroyed); *blessé* (to injure); *blessé* (injured). The pupil could then go a step further and divide these in to nouns (*l'ouragan*; *le vent*; *les inondations*) and verbs (*détruire*; *blessé*).

The **written section** of the paper at Higher Level requires the candidate to answer three questions, with Question 1(a) or (b) being compulsory. The student then has to answer two more questions from a relatively wide choice of Question 2 (a) or (b); Question 3(a) or (b) or Question 4(a) or (b).

Question 1, where the candidate must choose between (a) or (b), is worth 40 marks. One of these options will ask about a personal experience, while the other will ask for an opinion on a broader social issue. The candidate is expected to write approximately 90 words and is advised to spend roughly 25 minutes answering the question.

Questions 3 and 4, again containing a sub-choice of either (a) or (b), require the candidate to express their opinion following a prompt from a photograph, cartoon or quotation. Each one is worth 30 marks and the student is asked to write approximately 75 words per question, spending roughly 20 minutes on it.

Many students like to begin by answering Question 2(a) or (b). This question usually provides the opportunity to write a diary entry, but a message, a formal letter, an informal letter or an email may also feature. The diary entry is usually a very manageable task and students are well advised to prepare it. It is expected to be 75 words long and no more than 20 minutes should be allocated to this question. The nature of a diary entry is informal and as such provides the student a wonderful opportunity to show off nice phrases relating to the relevant emotion. These might include *Quelle bonnes nouvelles!* (What great news!); *Il s'est passé quelque chose de choquant!* (Something shocking has happened!); *J'ai du mal à y croire!* (I can't believe it!); *Je suis aux anges!* (I'm on cloud nine!); *Je suis vraiment à bout de patience!* (I'm really at the end of my tether!).

Finally, it is worthwhile learning off a few phrases that will help you to round off the diary entry, such as: *Qui vivra verra* (Time will tell); *Bon, c'est tout pour ce soir* (Right, that's all for this evening); *La nuit porte conseil* (I'll sleep on it); *Je me demande si demain j'aurai changé d'avis* (I wonder if tomorrow I'll have changed my opinion).

An **example of a diary entry**, taken from the 2006 Exam paper:

Mardi, le 29 mai

Cher journal,

Quelle catastrophe! Ma mere vient de me dire que Julie, ma correspondante française, va venir passer deux semaines à la maison en juillet, mais qu'est-ce qui a bien lui passer par la tête?! Je pensais pourtant avoir été claire: je ne peux pas supporter Julie!

L'été dernier, j'ai passé deux semaines chez elle dans le cadre d'un échange scolaire et le moins qu'on puisse dire, c'est que le courant n'est pas du tout passé entre nous. On n'a aucun point commun!

Bon, c'est tout pour ce soir. La nuit porte conseil ...

Sarah

In preparing for Question 1, as well as Questions 3 and/or 4, it is important to prepare sufficient vocabulary and basic phrases to deal with whatever topic may arise. Learning off a few essays in the hope that one of them can be regurgitated in full on exam day is inadvisable. All too often students spot a particular word in the question and write an essay that they have prepared in advance, but fail to adequately deal with what has been asked. A good example of this is Question 1(a) from the 2012 Higher Level paper where students were asked to discuss why young Irish people have plenty of reasons to be happy nowadays. Many students relied on essays they had prepared about the recession and consequently discussed why young Irish people are unhappy nowadays. Marks for such essays were accordingly low. It is therefore essential to refer back to the question to ensure you have adequately dealt with what has been asked.

The importance of planning and structure with regard to the written pieces cannot be overstated. When planning an answer it is advisable to focus on two, or at most, three ideas. While there is no penalty for exceeding the word limit the candidate may find that they have wasted valuable exam time in so doing. A good answer will begin with a general opening sentence relating to the topic and comprise two or three paragraphs. If answering a reaction piece it is imperative to give your opinion. To this end using phrases such as: *pour moi; selon moi; en ce qui me concerne; je crois que* to indicate your opinion is advised. Using words or phrases such as *tout d'abord, ensuite, de plus, d'ailleurs, enfin* to link your ideas and arguments is also indicative of a well-structured essay.

An example of an opinion piece relating to technology, for example, might look like this:

## La technologie

Les nouvelles technologies, et en particulier Internet, occupent une place très importante dans notre quotidien. Selon les sondages, de plus en plus de gens avouent qu'ils ne pourraient pas se passer d'Internet. En ce qui me concerne, je passe environ deux heures par jour sur la toile. Je pense qu'Internet est un outil très pratique, quasiment indispensable dans la vie moderne. En effet, cela permet d'envoyer des mails, de rester en contact avec ses amis, d'aller sur les réseaux sociaux, de se tenir au courant de l'actualité en lisant des articles, de faire des recherches pour des devoirs.

Cela dit, je ne suis pas pour autant accro à Internet. Je peux très bien vivre sans. Par exemple, quand je suis en vacances, ça ne me dérange pas de ne pas avoir accès à Internet. Cela fait parfois du bien de "débrancher" pour passer plus de temps en famille et entre amis notamment.

While attempting to predict what topics may arise on the written section of the Higher Level paper is a futile exercise, it is nonetheless advisable to prepare lots of vocabulary on key topics, including the environment, technology, racism, doping in sport, various social problems etc. so that the student will have a bank of words to rely on in the exam when planning their written answers.

Preparing vocabulary will also be of great benefit for the student in helping them to understand **comprehensions**. Yet what is an effective way to learn lots of vocabulary in a short space of time?

It is always advisable to start with a particular topic or theme, initially brainstorming some nouns related to that topic. Take, for example, the topic of "technology", key nouns might include:

the internet (*Internet*), a mobile phone (*un portable*), a laptop (*un ordinateur portable*), social networks (*les réseaux sociaux*).

The next step is to associate as many verbs as possible with each of the nouns. In other words, what can you "do" with each of these key nouns?

You can "surf" the Internet (*surfer sur Internet*) or "do research" (*faire des recherches sur Internet*); you can "turn on/off" a mobile phone (*allumer or mettre en marche/éteindre un portable*), "receive/send" texts or calls (*envoyer/recevoir des textos et des appels*), even "listen to music" (*écouter de la musique*), "type" on a laptop (*taper*), "watch" movies (*regarder des films*), "download" music and files (*télécharger de la musique et des fichiers*).

Drawing a quick mind map to establish what verbs you can associate with the given nouns will highlight the vocabulary you need to study prior to the exam. In addition, any idioms you can associate with the topic and incorporate in to your writing will only serve to increase you marks, provided they are not over-used. Some idioms worth learning include:

*Mon petit doigt me l'a dit* (a little bird told me); *avoir le coeur sur la main* (to be kindhearted); *il ne faut pas brûler des étapes* (don't run before you

can walk); *boire comme un trou* (to drink like a fish); *être myope comme une taupe* (to be as blind as a bat).

Lots more idioms and useful French phrases can be found at:  
[www.languagerealm.com](http://www.languagerealm.com).

Bon courage et bonne chance!