

A LIST OF WORDS “D’ORIGINE FRANÇAISE” (OF FRENCH ORIGIN)

By no means complete, this list is useful to high school students preparing for the SAT examinations. Many of these words are commonly tested on the verbal portion of the SAT. Examples of how the words are used are provided in the italicized sentences.

adroit – skilful, from the French word “à droite” – on the right. Probably due to the association of being skilled with being right-handed. *Cal has to be adroit to play the violin as well as he does.*

gauche – from the French “à gauche” – on the left. Probably due to the association of lack of being skilled with being left-handed. In English it means “socially awkward.” *How gauche!*

espouse – the second “s” is pronounced like a “z” – to support, agree with, from the French “épouser” – to marry. In English this word is almost always used in the term “to espouse an idea” - to support it, etc. *The French did not espouse American ideals in the Iraqi war.*

overture – from the French “ouvert” – open. In English it is the opening of a piece of music. By extension, one can make an overture to another person, an invitation to dialogue or relationship. *His overture was rudely rebuffed by the girl.*

rapport – from the French “rapport” – relationship – the quality of getting along with others. *That student has an easy-going rapport with others.*

malign – from the French “mal” – bad, and “ligne” – line. To say ill of another, to insult. *The student gave a presentation on the much-maligned octopus, which changed the class opinion about this misunderstood sea creature.*

espionnage – from the French word “espion” – spy. Spying. *Espionnage is still common among all countries.*

sortie – from the French verb “sortir” – to go out. By extension, a flight against the enemy made by an attack airplane in wartime. *The pilot survived 89 sorties in WWII.*

bête noir – in French “black beast,” by extension something that consistently annoys. *The Spanish teacher’s bête noir was students who tried to speak English in class.*

poverty – from the French “pauvre” – poor. *Poverty is ubiquitous (everywhere) in third world countries.*

oblivion – from the French “oublier” – to forget. The place where, if one goes there, he is in the realm of the forgotten. *Sailors lost at sea are in oblivion.*

oblivious – from the French “oublier” – not aware, ignorant, as if you never knew something. *She was oblivious to the boy’s overtures.*

faux pas – a social miscue, from the French “false step.” *The waiter spilled a drink on a \$1000 dress. What a faux pas!”*

raconteur - from the French “raconter” – to tell a story, a storyteller. *Mark Twain was one of the great American raconteurs.*

fluvial - from the French “fleuve” – river. Having to do with river systems. *Mark Twain’s Huck Finn is a book set in a fluvial setting.*

tête-à-tête - from the French “head to head” – an intimate conversation. *The two friends enjoyed one too many tête-à-têtes in class; the teacher finally moved one of them.*

nonchalance – from the French “not heated” – not taking things too seriously. *Some kids don’t know the difference between nonchalance and laziness.*

savoir vivre – from the French verb “savoir” - to know, and “vivre” – to live. Thus, “to know how to live.” *That person has the gift of savoir vivre.*

savoir faire – from the French "savoir" - to know, and “faire” – to make or do. Thus, “to know how to do something.” Instinctive knowledge of the right course of action in any circumstance. *That actor has a lot of savoir faire – he gets by quite well in life.*

envoy – from the French verb “envoyer” – to send. A person sent by one government to communicate with another. *The American envoy to Iceland has little to do.*

erudite – from the French verb “érudire” – to instruct. Scholarly. *The teacher makes many erudite comments in class.*

eclectic – from the French adjective “éclectique” – selective – gifted in many areas, having interests in many areas. *To say the least, this athlete who wrote poetry and did yoga was eclectic.*

ursine – from the French “ours” – bear. Someone who has ursine qualities has qualities that resemble those of a bear. *The wrestler picked up the car with his ursine strength.*

liaison – from the French “lier” – to link or tie together. A link between two governments like an envoy – a liaison officer. *The principal is a great liaison between students and parents when discipline is needed.*

aspirate – from the Old French “to aspire to, to seek” and the Latin “spiritus” – breath. The word means “breathed” or “the sound of the letter ‘h’.” *The “h” in French is aspirate.*

demitasse – from the French “half,” and “tasse” – cup. Smaller, 3.5 ounce coffee and espresso cups. *The demitasse is most used in France.*

reveille – from the French “se réveiller” – to wake up. A military term for the time the troops must wake up. A bugle call. *Reveille at Camp Carson is at 6:27 a.m.*

droll – from the French drôle,” – “odd, comical, funny, understatedly funny.” *His comment was very droll.*

interrupt – from the French verb “rompre” – to break. To break communication. *She interrupted him.*

soirée - from the French word “soir” – evening. A party. *The couple looked forward to the soirée with great anticipation.*

idiot savant - from the French verb “savoir” – to know. An intellectually disabled person who exhibits extraordinary ability in a highly specialized area, such as mathematics or music. *Dustin Hoffman played an idiot savant in “Rain Man.”*

ménage à trois – from the French verb “ménager” – to manage a house, and the French number “trois” – three. A living arrangement with three adults. *“Three’s Company” was a sitcom about a ménage à trois in the 1980’s.*

filial - brotherly, from the French word “fils” – son. Brotherly. *Robert has filial feelings for United States Marines; he feels like a brother to them.*

sanguine – from the French word “sang” – blood. Having the bright color of blood. In English it means, by extension, “bright outlook on life, optimistic.” *She keeps the club going with her sanguine personality.*

sang-froid – from the French words “sang” – blood – and “froid” – cold. Literally “cold blood.” In English it means coolness and composure, esp. under trying circumstances. *The commander of the unit showed remarkable sang-froid under the enemy barrage.*

sans – from the French word “without.” Without. *He walked outside on sunny days sans hat even though his hair was thinning.*

esprit de corps – from the French “esprit” – mind – and “corps” – body. The collective mind of the group, their spirit. *The Marine Corps develops its fighting spirit with awesome esprit de corps.*

epaulette – from the French word “épaule” – shoulder. A shoulder ornament, especially a fringed strap worn on military uniforms. *Originally found on military clothing, epaulettes are now fairly common in woman’s clothing.*

verdant – from the French “vert” – green. Describes rich green plant life, like verdant fields. *Vermont is verdant compared to Colorado.*

contradict – from the French “contre” – against, and “dire” – to say. To assert or express the opposite of (a statement). *She contradicted him.*

in lieu of – from the French word “lieu” – place. In place of. *The understudy performed in lieu of the star but nobody noticed the difference.*

lieutenant – from “lieu” – place, and “tenir” – to hold. A military rank. An officer “tenant” – holding – rank. *He had been a sergeant for years before being promoted to lieutenant.*

coup d'état – from the French “coup” – a strike, a blow – and “état” – state. Thus an overthrow of a government. *The navy participated in covert operations against the government of Igidabigida, and helped the coup d'état succeed.*

fluvial – from the French word “river” – fleuve. Having to do with river systems. *The fluvial plains of the Midwest often flood.*

francophile – from the French “franc” – having to do with the French people. A person very interested in the French culture. *She was both a bibliophile (interested in books) and a francophile --a happy combination.*

culpable – from the French “coupable” – guilty. *The man was not culpable and therefore not convicted; it was proven that he was asleep when the crime happened.*

segue – from the Italian and French “sequence” – a transition from one topic to another in a discussion or in music. *The student's comment was an excellent segue into the real topic of the class.*

recapitulate – from the French verb “récapituler” – to state over, to begin over, as in the recapitulation of a story or an idea. *In Mozart, the main musical idea is always recapitulated many times.*

cache (pronounced in English as “catch”) – from the French “cacher” – to hide. A bundle of valuables, gold or money, etc. that is hidden away somewhere. A cache of money. *The cache was not discovered for over a century.*

germane – being both pertinent and fitting; related to. *His idea is not germane to the discussion.*

folly – from the French masculine form “fou” or feminine form “folle” - crazy. *It is folly to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel!*

demure – from the French verb “to stay” – Modest and reserved in manner or behavior. *Her demeanor was quite demure.*

genuflect – from the French word “knee” - genou. To kneel down, usually used in a religious context. *They genuflected as they approached the altar.*

double entendre – from the French “to hear.” An ambiguity with one interpretation; Saying something that has two meanings, one covert and one overt. *The teacher makes double entendres in class all the time, but most students only hear the overt meaning.*

covert – from the French “couvert” – covered. Not openly practiced, engaged in, or shown, as in covert military operations. *The covert meaning of his double entendre was not in good taste.*

overt - from the French “ouvert” – open. Open and observable; not hidden, concealed, or secret. *She showed overt hostility towards him.*

lineage - from the French “ligne” – line. A family lineage is its line, its history, the family tree. *Jorge’s lineage can be traced back to the great Spanish conquistadors.*

genealogy - from the French “gens” – people. A family history, the family tree. *Josh’s genealogy can be traced back to the great Scott, Rob Roy.*

acuity – from the French “aigu” – sharp, or “acuité” – sharpness. Keen vision or understanding. *The Secretary of State shows great acuity in dealing with foreign governments.*

trompe l’oeil – from the French “tromper” – to deceive, and “oeil” – eye. A form of painting in which the eye is deceived into thinking an image is three dimensional when it is actually on a two dimensional painted surface. *Marc Chagall was good at trompe l’oeil, as were the French masters whose work is exhibited on the first floor of the musée du Louvre.*

antipathy – from the suffix “anti” – against, and connected to “pathos,” intense feelings. A form of dislike. It’s opposite in French is sympathie, or

sympathique (“sympa” – nice, referring to a person). He was oblivious of her antipathy towards him.

sollicitous – from the French verb “soliciter” – to rouse or set in motion. By extension currying favor, trying to get into the good graces of someone, as in sollicitous behavior or a sollicitous comment. *The employee made constant sollicitous comments to his boss.*

serendipity – from a Persian town – making fortunate discoveries by accident; good luck, a windfall, for no reason. *The boy felt that his being able to sit next to the prettiest girl in the class was pure serendipity.*

deus ex machina – from the French “Dieu” – God, and “machine” – machine. In Greek and Roman drama, a god lowered by stage machinery to resolve a plot or extricate the protagonist from a difficult situation. By extension, an unexpected, artificial, or improbable character, device, or event introduced suddenly in a work of fiction or drama to resolve a situation or untangle a plot. *His plays were fascinating, but most relied on some kind of deus ex machina to come to a conclusion.*

timbre – from the French “timbre” – quality of a sound. The quality and tone of a person’s voice or that of a musical instrument. *His voice is very sonorous. It has excellent timbre.*

ennui – from the French “s’ennuyer” – to bore or “ennuyer” – to bother. In English it means depression or boredom. *The French poet Baudelaire’s work was full of ennui, revealing his desire to get out of Paris and travel.*

passé – from the French participle “passé” – finished, over. Done, over, old, former, past. Pronounced passay. *Fashion from the ‘90’s is definitely passé.*

naissant – from the French “naissance” – birth, or the word “renaissance” – rebirth. It describes something in the process of being formed, coming into existence, as in a naissant idea. *The eighteenth century writings of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu prefigured the naissant turmoil of the next century.*

lese-majesty – from the French “lèse” – crime, and “majesté” – majesty. An offense or crime committed against the ruler or supreme power of a state.

By extension, a personal affront to someone. *In most modern states the specific crime of lese majesty is mixed with the crime of treason.*

adieu – a combination of the two French words “à” – at or to – and “Dieu” – God. It means good bye forever, or all the way to God, as opposed to “au revoir” – see you again, good-bye temporarily. *At the end of his life, he said his adieus to all whom he had known.*

chassis – from the French “châssis” – frame. The frame of a car. *He lifted the chassis to show off for his girlfriend.*

chic – (pronounced “sheek”) – from the French, originally “subtlety.” Conforming to the current fashion; stylish: chic clothes; a chic boutique. *We speak of classy or sophisticated clothes as ‘chic’ in French.*

detour – from the French “de” – from, and “tour” – turn. A roundabout way, especially a road used temporarily instead of a main route. By extension, deviation from a direct course of action. *Their research was going well, but eventually they ran into some detours.*

elite – from French “élite” – selection, choice. A class of persons or a member of such a class enjoying superior intellectual, social, or economic status; the best or most skilled members of a group. *Many kids dream of becoming elite athletes.*

entrée – from the French verb “entrer” – to enter. Originally, the opening piece of an opera or ballet. Cookery sense is from the eighteenth century; originally the dish which was introductory to the main course. *Americans use the term entrée for the main course, which is not true in France.*

cuisine – from the French nouns “cooking” or “kitchen.” Things having to do with cooking, esp. the meals that result. *The words “French cuisine” are world famous.*

nouvelle cuisine – from the French “nouveau” – new. Lit. "new cooking." A style of cooking emphasizing freshness and presentation, dating from 1975. *Nouvelle cuisine is no longer new – everybody wants to eat that way.*

haute cuisine – from the French “haut” – high. Lit. "high-class cooking." an elaborate and skillful manner of preparing food. *The city of Lyon is always*

in competition with Paris for attention as the center of haute cuisine in France.

chef – from French “chef de cuisine”, lit. head of the kitchen. The lead cook in charge of all operations of the kitchen. *The great French chefs often name their restaurants by simply putting their own name on them.*

hors d’oeuvre – from the French “hors” – “outside” and “oeuvre” – work
Appetizer in a meal, “out of the main work” (of the meal). *She enjoyed the hors d’oeuvres so much that she could not eat the main dish.*

film noir – from the French “film” – film, and “noir” – black. A mystery film about shady characters. *Humphrey Bogart starred in many wonderful American film noirs.*

tranche de vie – from the French words “tranche” – slice and “vie” – life. It describes a genre of film in which there is no plot, but merely a “slice” of time out of a person’s life. *The film critic preferred tranche de vie over film noir.*

genre – from the French “genre” – kind, category, style. It refers to a genre of literature, like poetry, or film, like film noir, etc. *His favorite literary genre was mysteries, but he also liked historical fiction and romance novels.*

roman à clef – from the French “roman” – novel, and “clé” – key. A novel describing real-life events behind a façade of fiction. The “key”, not present in the text, is the correlation between events and characters in the novel and events and characters in real life. *“Citizen Kane,” a movie written by Orson Wells, was a fictionalized portrayal of the life of William Randolph Hearst. It was clearly “à clef,” so much so that Hearst was so offended by the movie that he blacklisted Wells from his social circle.*

visage – from the French “vis” – face. A person’s face, and by extension, the expression on it. *His demeanor was of noble visage.*

façade – from the French “façade” – face. A front of a building or, by extension, a front put up by a person to protect others from knowing more. *The President used a lot of ideological slogans that were really just a façade for his ambition for power.*

[/index.php?term=cul-de-sac](#)cul-de-sac – from the French “cul” – bottom, and “sac,” bag or sack. A street that does not go anywhere, ending in a rounded area. *The streets in her section of town had many cul-de-sacs.*

chicanery – from the French “chicanerie” – a trick or foolishness, trickery. *Was chicanery involved in the election in Florida in the form of voter intimidation?*

naïve – from the French “naïf” – natural, just born. Innocent in the ways of the world, lacking worldly experience and understanding, unsuspecting. *Naïve tourists arrive in Las Vegas daily, ready to be separated from their money.*

resumé – from the French verb “résumer” – to sum up. Pronounced “rayzoomay.” A brief account of one's professional or work experience and qualifications, often submitted with an employment application. By extension, a summary: a resumé of the facts of a case, etc. *His resume was excellent; he got the job.*

rouge – make-up. from the French word “rouge” – red. A red or pink cosmetic for coloring the cheeks or lips. *She wore a bit too much rouge.*

chauffeur – from the French “chauffer” – to heat up or stoke, as in a fire, originally referring to the member of the train crew who stoked up the fire of the engine. By extension, driver, and in English, a paid driver. *The chauffeur was a good one, never talking and always driving safely.*

chaperone – from the French “chaperon” – cape or hood. An older person who attends and supervises a young person or a social gathering for young people. *Kramer once chaperoned a Miss U.S.A. contestant in Atlantic City.*

bastion – from the French “bâtiment” – building. A person or place can be a bastion of strength for others, a place of protection, a defensive stronghold. *He is a bastion of strength for others.*

concurrent – happening at the same time as something else. *The football game and ceremony happened concurrently, so I could only attend one of them.*

communiqué – from the French “communiquer” – to communicate. A written message usually between military or political organizations. *General Malanut issued a communiqué for all armored personnel.*

flotsam and jetsam – from the French “flotter” – to float, and “jeter” – to throw. *Stuff, garbage, cast off of ships at sea and left to float for years, like old bottles.*

morcel – from the French “morceau” – piece. A small piece of food. *A morcel of cake fell off the table and the dog was on it.*

soupçon – from the French “soupçonner” – to suspect, or “soupçon” – suspicion. Used in cooking, this refers to an even smaller amount than a dash. Used with spices in flavoring food. *And now, just a soupçon of oregano and we are ready to eat!*

mea culpa – this is a Latin phrase used often in English, connected to the French noun “coupable” – guilty. An acknowledgment of a personal error or fault. *When there was no denying it, he broke into a broad grin and said “Mea culpa!”*

tabula rasa – from the Latin “scraped tablet” and connected to the French verb “raser” – to shave. The mind before it receives the impressions gained from experience. *Rousseau and Locke suggested that we begin life with a blank slate, a tabula rasa. Other philosophers have disagreed.*

rendez-vous – from the French “rendre” to render or give and “vous” - you. To take a meeting, to have a meeting, a rendez-vous with someone. Is used in the military as a meeting point during a battle. Pronounced roudayvu. *The young couple had a rendez-vous for lunch at noon.*

pithy – from a scientific term “to pith,” or remove the brain of an insect or frog with a wire probe, to do an experiment on it. A pithy sentence has a lot to it, it is to the point, very brainy, precisely meaningful; forceful and brief. *She always makes pithy comments in class.*

pot-pourri – from the French “pot pourri” – stew," lit. "rotten pot," from the verb “pourrir” – to rot. By extension a mixture of things, a miscellaneous anthology or collection: a potpourri of short stories and humorous verse.

Also a mixture of dried flower petals and spices used to scent the air. *Her presentation was a potpourri of information that never quite connected.*

je ne sais quoi – from the French “je” – I – and “savoir” – to know – and “quoi” – what. Lit. "I do not know what." A quality or attribute that is difficult to describe or express, an “inexpressible something.” *She has a certain je ne sais quoi that sets her apart from others.*

incendiary – from the French “incendie” – fire. Causing or capable of causing fire. Of or containing chemicals that produce intensely hot fire when exploded: an incendiary bomb. By extension, tending to inflame; inflammatory. *The politician upset everyone with his incendiary speech.*

milieu – from the French “milieu” – middle, medium. The totality of one's surroundings; an environment. *Taking the artist out of New York completely denied him his milieu, and he was quite unhappy about it.*

legerdemain – from the French “leger” – light, lightness, and “de” – of, and “main” – hand. Slight of hand, magic, trickery, deception. *The Texas banker was eventually convicted for his years of financial legerdemain.*

sentient – from the French “sentir” – to feel. Experiencing sensation or feeling. By extension, being conscious, aware. Most commonly used with the word “being,” as in a “sentient being” – one who exists, feels life. *All human beings are sentient beings.*

abattoir – from the French “abattre” – to beat down. A slaughterhouse. Abattoir occasionally replaces the English word “slaughterhouse.” By extension, something likened to a slaughterhouse. *The hurricane was so destructive that it gave a strong impression of the world as an abattoir.*

accoutrements – from the French “accoustrer” – to arrange or sew up. An accessory item of equipment or dress. Usually used in the plural. By extension, outward forms of recognition; trappings. *Cathedral ceilings, heated swimming pools, and other accoutrements are signs of great wealth.*

raison d'être – reason to be, to exist, from the French verb “être” – to be. *It would be a mistake to say that his raison d'être is sports. He actually has many varied interests.*

sollicitous – from the French verb “solliciter” – to solicit – ingratiating oneself to others, a sollicitous comment, currying favor. *Students never make sollicitous comments to teachers.*

leit-motif (pron. lite moteef) – a musical or literary theme associated with a particular object, character, or emotion. For instance, the ominous music in *Jaws* plays whenever the shark is approaching. That particular theme is the *leit-motif* for the shark. This is a German word which borrowed “motif” from the French. *Perhaps one of the most famous leit-motifs in music is the melody to Prokofiev’s “Peter and the Wolf.”*

hyperbole – exaggeration for effect. Of Latin origin more than French, this is a very commonly tested word. *He’s as big as a house!*

début – a beginning. From the French “début” – start. *The play’s début was delayed because of the social unrest in the city.*

treasure trove – from the French “trouver” – to find. A found treasure. *After studying classical music for years, he decided that the greatest treasure trove of all in music is Mozart.*

faux – from the French “faux” – false. False or fake, referring most often in America as faux jewelry or faux fur. *She looked great, but all her jewelry was faux.*

parley – from the French verb “parler” – to speak. A conference held usually to avert conflict or battle. *Before attacking, the pirates called for a parley with the men protecting the village.*

parlay – from the French verb “parier” – a bet. A form of betting. By extension, to augment or increase in value. *He was able to parlay his investment into a fortune.*

defenestrate – from the French noun “fenêtre” – window. To throw oneself out of a window. *In the stock market crash of 1929, a lot of ruined businessmen defenestrated themselves.*

hibernate – from the French noun “hiver” – winter. To sleep through the winter. *Many animals hibernate, but we mainly associate hibernation with bears.*

