

Learn the lingo

1) En

Let's first start by defining *en*. As a pronoun, it is used for many reasons and in many contexts. Mostly, it replaces *de*, *du*, *de l'*, *de la* or *des* + a noun. *En* can be translated as 'some' or 'of it', or 'not any' in a negative context. It is most often used for indefinite quantities of something, but can also be used to replace *de* + a noun (but not a person) in many expressions where verbs are followed by *de*.

Note: *en* is placed in front of the verb.

Examples:

Voulez-vous du café? = Would you like some coffee?

Oui, j'en veux! = Yes, I would like some!
Est-ce que vous vous souvenez du dernier café que vous avez pris avec moi? = Do you remember the last coffee you had with me?

Oui, je m'en souviens! = Yes, I remember!

When using *en* with the imperative (command form), *en* is placed after the verb, as in this example:

Prenez du café! Prenez-en = Have some coffee!

However, if the command is negative, *en* goes back in front of the verb:

2) Y

What about *Y*? *Y* is a pronoun that replaces a place, usually a phrase beginning with *à*, *chez*, *dans*, etc. You can translate *y* by 'there'. Even though you don't need to add 'there' systematically in English, you will need it in French.

Examples:

Est-ce que tu vas chez Annick aujourd'hui?
– *Oui j'y vais!* = Are you going to Annick's place today? – Yes I'm going (there).
Nous allons au marché. Vous voulez y aller? = We're going to the market. Would you like to go (there)?

The other use of *y* is when a verb is followed by *à* + a noun (not a person though). This is tricky, as this means that

Two tricky pronouns: en and y

So tiny, you might think you can ignore them. But they have an important place in the French language. So how are *en* and *y* used?

Ne m'en parle plus! = Don't talk to me about it any more!

If there is an expression of quantity like *beaucoup de* (a lot of), *peu de* (a little of) or a number, then *en* will replace the noun.

Examples:

Veux-tu un peu de crème dans ton café? = Do you want some cream in your coffee?
Oui, j'en veux bien un peu, merci! = Yes, I would like some, thank you!

Note: *En* usually can't replace *de* + verb.

Examples:

J'ai décidé de prendre ce travail – J'ai décidé de le prendre = I decided to take this work – I decided to take it.

Finally, you will find *en* in some everyday expressions – these are very useful to learn as the French use them all the time:

Examples:

Je m'en vais! = I'm leaving!

J'en ai marre! = I'm fed up!

Je n'en peux plus! = I can't handle this anymore!

Ne vous en faites pas! = Don't you worry about it! (a negative command)

you have to know which verbs are normally followed by *à*. To start with, begin by just learning a few of the verbs you are most likely to use.

Examples:

Penser à = to think of/to think about
Je pense à mes vacances! – *J'y pense* = I'm thinking about my holidays – I'm thinking of them.

Répondre à = to respond to
Je réponds à mes e-mails. – *J'y réponds* = I'm replying to my emails – I'm replying to them.

Note: *Y* usually cannot replace *à* + verb!

Examples:

Je pense à faire ce travail – Je pense à le faire = I'm thinking about doing this job – I'm thinking about doing it

Practice time!

Let's place *en* and *y* in context in this short conversation, first in French, then in English.

Une femme et son mari préparent les valises avant de partir pour deux semaines de vacances. La femme qui remplit l'essentiel de la valise pose des questions à son mari.

Sarah : Robert, combien de t-shirts je mets dans la valise ?

Robert : Tu peux en mettre 4 ou 5, s'il te plaît.

Sarah : Oui. Est-ce que tu veux prendre un livre ?

Robert : Oui j'en veux bien un. Je vais en choisir un maintenant.

Sarah : D'accord. Est-ce que tu vas aller à la pharmacie aujourd'hui ?

Robert : Oui je peux y aller. Pourquoi ?

Sarah : Tu peux acheter des aspirines et de l'Alka Seltzer ?

Robert : Oui bien sûr je peux en prendre.

Sarah : Est-ce que tu vas également passer chez Yvette ?

Robert : Oui j'y vais pour lui demander d'arroser nos plantes.

Sarah : Très bien ! N'oublie pas aussi de répondre au e-mail de Valérie. Elle t'en veut un peu que tu ne répondes presque jamais à ses messages !

Robert : Bon, tu as raison. Je vais y répondre immédiatement et après je m'en vais...

Sarah : Eh, attends, j'ai encore quelques questions et j'ai l'impression que tu ne t'intéresses pas du tout à m'aider à finir cette valise !

Robert : Si je m'y intéresse, mais t'as vu tout le boulot que tu me donnes ? J'en ai assez, je n'en veux plus pour le moment ! A tout à l'heure ! Ciao !

A wife and her husband are packing before leaving for two weeks. The woman who is doing most of the packing is asking her husband some questions:

Sarah: Robert, how many t-shirts should I put in the suitcase?

Robert: You can put in 4 or 5 please.

Sarah: Yes. Do you want to take a book?

Robert: Yes, I would like one. I'm going to pick one now.

Sarah: OK, are you going to the pharmacy today?

Robert: Yes, I can go. Why?

Sarah: Can you buy some aspirins and Alka Seltzer?

Robert: Yes, of course I can get some.

Sarah: Can you also drop in at Yvette's?

Robert: Yes, I'm going to ask her to water our plants.

Sarah: Very well! Also, don't forget to answer Valerie's email! She's a bit upset with you that you hardly ever respond to her emails.

Robert: OK, you're right. I will answer it immediately, and then I'm leaving...

Sarah: Hey, wait, I still have a few more questions and I have the impression that you're not at all interested in helping me finish this suitcase!

Robert: Yes, I'm interested but have you noticed how much work you're giving me? I have enough, I don't want anymore for the time being. See you later! Ciao!

And now, a little test...

Answer the following questions by replacing the noun or place with *en* or *y*:

- 1) *Est-ce que vous voulez une bière ? Oui, _____*
- 2) *Est-ce que tu vas au cinéma ce soir ? Non, _____*
- 3) *Est-ce que vous apportez un dessert ? Oui, _____*

Answers: 1) *Oui j'en veux une*; 2) *Non, je n'y vais pas*; 3) *Oui j'en apporte un*