

31 English Words That Are Actually French

It's estimated that 30% of English words come from French, but you probably wouldn't recognize most of them.

English is the product of many cultures clashing on the British Isles for over 1,000 years and an empire spread around the globe. One of the biggest influences came from France in 1066 during the Norman Conquest. William the Conqueror's military victories instituted a French-speaking aristocracy in England (and French remained the official language for the next 400 years).

Now many native speakers recognize French words in English when they see them, but few know their true original meanings. Here are some of the most surprising examples:

Did you know that **etiquette** originated in the French Court of Louis XIV at Versailles? A number of *étiquettes* (little cards) were used by courtiers to remember all the little rules they needed to abide by while at court. The word's meaning gradually morphed into "how to conduct oneself properly in polite society."

And did you know that **sabotage** originated from the French word *sabot*, which is a kind of wooden clog worn by French and Breton peasants? As industrialization swept Europe, disgruntled peasants soon discovered that a *sabot*, when thrown into machinery, was very effective at bringing much-maligned factories to a halt.

Going to the **dentist**? Why not simply say "toothier" and be done with it? Because that's what it means: "tooth" in French is *dent*, and the dentist is a "toothier," a professional who takes care of your teeth

You love saving **coupons** for a discount? The word literally means "piece cut off," since *couper* is "to cut" in French.

You're hooked on **crochet**? Of course you are — it means "little hook" in French. You could crochet a **rectangle** (straight angle) depicting a scene from a **Renaissance** (rebirth) painting while you wait for your **soufflé** (blown) to get properly light and fluffy in the oven.

Brimming with ideas for crochet patterns? Create a **dossier** (a bundle of papers with a label on the back, from the French *dos*, meaning "back") to organize all those creative ideas. And take a break — your guests are arriving, and it would be a **faux-pas** (false step) to not have the table set. Prepare the **hors d'oeuvre** (literally "outside the work") and fully embrace your **role** (from *rôle*, the "roll" of paper containing an actor's part) as a gracious host for this **rendezvous** (literally: "present yourselves").

The guests arrive and Jonathan has brought his ouija board. While everyone nibbles and drinks, he clears a small table in the corner, and everyone gathers for a **séance** (sitting) to attempt to contact the dead. An angry spirit replies and suddenly a vase explodes! The **debris** (from the obsolete *débriser*, "to break down") is scattered all over the floor. And the **soufflé** also exploded! It's a mess, so everyone decides to go to a **restaurant** (literally "to restore with food") instead. Contacting the dead can be risky — it's like playing a game of **roulette** (little wheel).

There is a **queue** (tail) to get into the restaurant, but an **ambulance** (walking hospital) arrives and the crowd parts. According to the **maître d** (short for maître d'hôtel, "master of hotel," the host), there was a fight inside, and the **debacle** (literally "unleash") has closed the restaurant. Everyone decided to go home, but Jonathan suggested a **detour** (change of direction) to a food truck serving delicious falafels.

It seems Jonathan ruined and saved the night! But who can be mad at him? He knows how to **amuse** (entertain) and **maneuver** (literally "to operate with the hand") himself out of difficulties with such... what's the word? Ah, yes — **panache**! It literally means the "feather" worn on a hat or a helmet. This usage originated with King Henry IV of France, who was a courageous military leader with a love for the finer things. He wore a white plume on his helmet and was famed for his war cry: "Follow my white plume!" (*Ralliez-vous à mon panache blanc !*).

So don't be shy when using French words in English. They add **elan** (from *élancer*, "to dart") to your speech and make you stand out from the crowd. Don't **camouflage** yourself (from *camouflet*, "a whiff of smoke in the face"), and be **chic** (a French word of obscure origin, but that might originate from the German Schick, which means "skill")!

A few more examples:

avant-garde: literally "front guard"

envoy: from the French *envoyer*, which means "to send." That gives new meaning to **envelope** as well, doesn't it?

parachute: from French *para* (protection against) + *chute* (fall)

pioneer: a military term denoting a member of the infantry from the French *pionnier* (foot soldier) who was always at the front

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