

False Cognates: English vs. French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese

Ability – Skill; used much more frequently than *capacity*, which is typically used to refer to size, e.g., *The arena has the **capacity** to fit 50,000 spectators.*

Accident – Chance occurrence, almost always negative, can range from very minor (e.g., *The child spilled juice on the carpet by **accident***) to very serious (e.g., *There was a major car **accident***).

Achieve – Succeed in completing a goal; has a very positive connotation, e.g., *He finally **achieved** his goal of climbing Mt. Everest.*

Actually – In reality, NOT at this time.

Note to French speakers: although *actually* is the most accurate translation of *en fait*, it is not used as a sort of verbal tic to begin sentences, the way it is in French. Its use in everyday conversation is much closer to that of *en réalité*. Although *actually* can be placed at the beginning of a sentence for emphasis, it is typically placed between the subject and the verb (like other adverbs), e.g., *Are you looking for Robert? Sorry, he **actually** left a few minutes ago.*

Agony – Intense, excruciating pain; can be experienced by someone who is severely ill or injured but who is expected to recover.

Alumnus/-a, pl. Alumni/-ae – Former student. A person who is currently studying at an institution is a *pupil* (more common in the UK to refer to children and teenagers in primary/secondary-school) or a *student* (more common in the US).

Amateur – A person who practices an activity for enjoyment rather than money, but often at a relatively high level. Can have a slightly negative connotation, i.e., that someone isn't talented enough to pursue an activity professionally.

Ancient – Typically used to describe things that are more than 1500 years old. Can also be translated as *former* (used mostly for people) or *old* (people and things) when it refers to what one used to have, e.g., *my former/old professor, my old car*. Fr. *ancien élève* = alumnus/alumna or graduate, e.g., *C'est un ancien élève d'Oxford* = He's an Oxford grad(uate).

Animate (vs. Fr., animer) – One animates a cartoon (makes the figures move); one *moderates* a conference or a panel.

Anniversary – Date of an important event; the date of a person's birth is their *birthday*.

Annoy – Irritate, mildly anger. Something uninteresting is *boring*.

Argument – Strong disagreement or debate; has a distinctly negative connotation. The storyline of a novel or film is the *plot*.

Assist – *Help* or *aid* someone (note that this verb takes a direct object in English; one assists someone, not to someone). The French *assister à* is translated as *to attend* or *be present at*, or informally *to go to* (e.g., *I went to my friend Catherine's party last night*).

Assume – Draw a conclusion, e.g., *I assumed she was coming to the party, but I haven't seen her all night*. One *accepts*, *takes on*, or *shoulders* a responsibility.

Attend (vs. Fr., attendre) – Be present at. When a person has not yet arrived, you *wait for* them.

Available – If someone is free to meet for lunch, they are *available*. There is no direct equivalent of the French *disponible* or the Italian *disponibile*.

Bless (vs. Fr., blesser) – Offer a benediction, pray over someone. If you have experienced bodily harm, you have *injured* or *hurt* yourself.

Camera – Device used to take photographs. An enclosed space in a house is a *room*.

Character – A person in a play or novel. This word can be used to describe a (real) person's characteristics or moral qualities, but *personality* is more often used.

Classic/Classical – Something that is *classic* is traditional; something *classical* comes from Greek/Roman antiquity, or from a culture's highest (historical) point of civilization.

College – In the United States, a *college* is a four-year university equivalent that grants bachelor's degrees only; it can also refer to the division of a large university responsible for undergraduate education (e.g., Harvard College is the undergraduate division of Harvard University). In the UK, it is typically used in the context of sixth-form colleges that students attend starting at around age 16, to prepare for A-level examinations. It is also used for some certain secondary schools, e.g., Eton College, as well as for technical/vocational schools.

Compromise (vs. Port., compromisso) – Agreement reached by disputing parties in which each makes concessions in return for obtaining things that they want. A scheduled meeting is an *appointment*.

Convenient – easy to access or use, e.g. *Bicycles have become a very **convenient** travel option in many cities.*

Constipated (vs. Sp., *constipado*) – Bowel blockage. A mild respiratory infection is a **cold**.

Control – Have power over, dominate. One **checks** to make certain of something, or to ensure that a situation is under control, e.g., *We should check on the kids to make sure they're okay.*

Costume – Particular or historical style of dress, worn by actors in a play or children on Halloween. A professional worker wears a **suit**.

Currently – Right now, at this moment, e.g., *the current* situation. One speaks a language **fluently**.

Deception – Falsification, presentation of misleading information. To feel bad as a result of a person's unreliable behavior, or because of an event's cancellation, is to be **disappointed**.

Demand – Insist very rudely that someone do something, e.g., *The diner complained that his steak had been improperly cooked and **demanded** that the waiter bring him a new one.* One **asks** a question.

Discussion – Conversation; entirely neutral connotation, with no implication of disagreement.

Disgust (vs. Sp. *disgusto*) - Repulsion, revulsion. A mild dislike for something is a **distaste**.

Economic – Related to the economy; **Economical** - Inexpensive.

Editor – person who prepares a manuscript for publication. A company that acquires and distributes books is a **publisher**.

Educated/Education – Refers to formal schooling only, e.g., *He's very educated: he finished his doctorate last year.*

Embarrassed (vs. Sp., *embarazada*) – A person who feels foolish is **embarrassed**; a woman who is expecting a baby is **pregnant**.

Eventually – At some undetermined point in the future, e.g., *We'll get a new sofa **eventually**... Maybe next year.* An event that might occur is something that could **possibly** happen.

Experiment – Test to assess the validity of a scientific hypothesis. A person who has done a particular activity for a long time is **experienced**.

Fabric – Cloth.

Factory – Large building where items such as cars are produced/assembled. Animals live on a *farm*.

Formation – Creation, assemblage, e.g., the formation of a new group or committee. Education is used for schooling, e.g., She received an excellent education at that school.

Frequent – In English, *frequent* generally acts as an adjective meaning *very often*, e.g., *They are frequent diners at this restaurant*. It is possible to use this word as a verb, e.g., *They frequent this restaurant every time they're in town*, but this usage is less common. On the other hand, a student can only **attend** a school or university.

Grand – Majestic, dignified, impressive. The opposite of *small* is **big** or **large**.

Gross – Disgusting (very informal).

Gusto – Great enthusiasm. One talks about a food's **taste**.

In fact – Note to Italian speakers that this is two words. This expression is typically reserved for strong contradictions and is used less often than it is in French or Italian. **Actually** is far more common. In addition, *in fact* is not used to confirm another person's comment, as it is in Italian (e.g., "*E proprio difficile questo lavoro*". "*Infatti!*"). This usage can be translated as *exactly*.

Journal – Publication containing scholarly articles. A daily publication reporting current events is a **newspaper**.

Large – General synonym for *big*.

Library – Institution from which people can borrow books; one purchases books at a **bookstore** (US) or a **bookshop** (UK).

Magazine – Publication issued on a weekly or monthly basis, e.g., *Vogue* or *The Economist*. One purchases items at a **store** (more common in the US) or a **shop** (more common in the UK).

Medicine – Field of study related to the human body; a person who practices medicine can only be called a **doctor**.

Miserable – Extremely unhappy. Someone who is very poor is **impoverished** or **destitute**.

Money – If a person pays for an item that costs \$2.50 with a \$5 note, the bills and coins they receive back are called **change**. **Money** is the general term for currency.

Morbid – gruesome or related to severe disease; the opposite of hard is **soft**.

Occasion (vs. Fr. *d'occasion*) – a specific time, e.g., *They met on two occasions*; or, an important celebration/ceremony. Items previously owned by another person are **used**, e.g., *used books, used clothing*,

Plain (vs. Fr. *plein*) – Simple, not fancy. Fr. *plein de qqchs* = **full of** something.

Parents – Your mother and father are your **parents**. The other members of your family are your **relatives**. Your brothers and sisters can also be called **siblings**.

Polite – Having good manners.

Pose (vs. Fr. *poser*) – To present oneself falsely or insincerely; or to adopt a specific bodily posture, e.g., *the children posed for the photographer*. One can pose a question in English, but **ask** is more common. One **puts down** or **sets down** one's things (*posez vos affaires* = put down your things).

Pretend – Synonym for *imagine* — what young children do when they play together. The English equivalent of the Fr. *prétendre* is **claim**; It. *pretendere* is **insist** or **demand**.

Preoccupy – *Preoccupate* does not exist. It can also be translated as *bother* (US, bah-ther or baw-ther; UK, baw-thuh), e.g., *something's bothering me*.

Present (v. pree-ZENT) – Give a lecture or discuss a report publicly. One **introduces** a person to someone.

Professor – Someone who possesses a doctorate and teaches at the university level; instructors of younger students (all ages) are **teachers**.

Publicity – Media attention, e.g., *The celebrity received a lot of publicity for his most recent film role*. A poster or video whose purpose is to induce consumers to purchase a product is an **advertisement** (US: adverTISEment, *ad* for short; UK: adVERTizment, *advert* for short).

Realise/Realize – Become aware of, e.g., *When I arrived home, I realized that I didn't have my keys*. It is possible to use this verb in the sense of *achieve a goal* or *bring a project to fruition*, but that is not the standard usage.

Record (vs. Sp. *recordar*, It. *ricordare*) – To capture sounds or images for later playback. To retain information in one's mind is to **remember**; to tell someone something they have forgotten is to **remind** them.

Regard (vs. Fr. *regarder*) – To consider, e.g., *Zinedine Zidane is widely regarded as one of the best soccer/football players of all time*. One **watches** television or a movie/film.

Responsible (adj. only) – Reliable, able to manage all aspects of a situation. Although this word can be used to describe someone who has committed a crime (*the responsible party*), **guilty** is more frequently used in everyday conversation.

Robe (vs. It., *roba*) – Gown worn over one's clothes; an informal term for *things* is **stuff**.

Romance – Love story. A long work of fiction is a **novel**.

Rope (vs. Sp. *ropa*) – Heavy cord. A person wears **clothes** or **clothing**.

Sane – A person who is psychologically normal is **sane**; a person who does not have any diseases is **healthy**.

Rest (vs. Fr. *rester*) – To relax or sleep; **repose** is very formal/literary in English. One **remains** (formal) or **stays** (informal) at an event or in a place.

Savage – Uncivilized and dangerous; strongly negative connotation. Undomesticated plants and animals, and people who are unconventional or out of control, are **wild** (positive or negative connotation depending on the context).

Sensible – Practical, level-headed. A person who is strongly affected by pleasant and unpleasant events and shows emotion easily is **sensitive**.

Smoking – The act of inhaling on a cigarette or cigar. The most formal type of men's suit is a **tuxedo**.

Society (vs. Fr., *société*) – A group of individuals belonging to community; also, a club. A workplace is a **business** or a **company**.

Story (vs. History) – A **story** is the plot of a novel, film, or play; **history** refers to events that happened in the past.

Specify (Fr., *préciser*) – Unlike many other common verbs, *préciser* does not have an exact English equivalent. It is translated as **to specify** or **to be more precise**, although these constructions (particularly the latter) can have a slightly more demanding connotation than the French. When requesting additional information, people often say something like, *Could you please provide a bit more information/detail?*

Support – To hold up physically (e.g., *The beams support the ceiling*); to sustain a person emotionally (e.g., *He supported me during a difficult time*); to uphold or advocate for a cause/organization (e.g., *I can't believe they still support that law*).