# How many French words are there in English?



Nearly 30% of all English words come directly or indirectly from French. English speakers will typically know at least 1500 French words without needing to study the language, though they may not recognise the original pronunciation.

#### The Normans

In 1066 the Normans invaded England. They introduced a legal and administrative system using a Norman French dialect, Anglo Norman. Over time around 10,000 French words (typically with Latin roots) came into common usage in England. Of these 7,000 French words survive in modern English.

Sometimes the new Anglo-Norman words exist alongside existing Anglo-Saxon ones: *beef* (from French *boeuf*) and *cow* for example. The Norman word is often considered more formal as in *sweat* (Anglo-Saxon) and *perspire* (Norman).

The Normans also had an enormous impact in key areas of vocabulary: particularly **politics** (coup d'état), **legal language** (jury, judge, justice, plaintiff, verdict) and diplomacy (chargé d'affaires). Norman words are typically used to describe **military terms** (battle, navy, march, enemy), **the state** (parliament, noble) and **the Church** (miracle, sermon, virgin, saint).

# **Quick Check**

- 1. What percentage of English words originate from French?
- 2. How many French words does the average person know?

# **Middle English**

Eventually Anglo Norman declined and a new form, Middle English, evolved. But French remained the language of court and learning. As a result many Anglo-Saxon words remained in use but lost their social status.



## **Pronunciation**

French influence on English words can also be seen in pronunciation. One example is the diphthong (long 'o' sound) *boy*, for example. Or the 'th' sound in thin/shin.

French words in English generally retain their original pronunciation: *ballet*, for example, has a silent 't' rather than a sounded one as in Spanish. Some common nouns have been completely anglicised e.g. the hard 's' in *Paris*.

#### **Social Status**

Fowler, in his <u>Modern English Usage</u> (1926) talks about the 'vulgarity' of the excessive use of French words and phrases - an attitude summed up in the old joke: *Pretentious? Moi?* 

Sometimes a French word will sound misleadingly *chic* in English. *Bistro* for example, has romantic French associations but the Russian origin is "bystro" meaning "fast". Therefore, your nearest "bistro" is more likely to serve burgers and fries under bright lights than the *menu du jour* by candlelight.

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### French Words in Modern English

There are 1,700 cognates (words identical in the French & English) here. Many have equivalents in English (au contraire/on the contrary, for example) but some capture a precise meaning not available in English. Here is a short selection:

à la carte	To choose individual items of menu rather than a fixed price meal.
Aperitif	An alcoholic drink before a meal
à la mode	In the modern style
Adieu	A final farewell
Adroit	Skillful, clever
Gauche	Clumsy, inexperienced.
Genre	Type or class of film, book etc.
Art déco	Design style popular in 1930s e.g. Tiffany lamp, Paris Metro signs etc.
Cordon bleu	Masterchef/high quality food
Déjà vu	Feeling that you have seen seen/experienced something before
Fiancé, fiancée	Engaged to be married

# **Quick Check**

- 1. Which one of these vocabulary groups does not contain a lot of French words?
  - a. diplomacy b) technology
- c) food/catering
- d) dance
- 2. What is the anglo-saxon alternative word to bouef?
- 3. What do call high-quality cooking?
- 4. What is the French word for a drink before a meal?
- 5. Write three more words or phrases you might find in a restaurant.
- 6. Another word for fashionable?
- 7. A type or category of book/film etc?
- 8. Write five sentences using English/French cognates.

 ${\it Practise using common \ French/English \ cognates \ in \ \underline{this \ crossword}.}$