



Tu or vous?

The decision map, the switching phrases, and the traps.

01. The 10-second decision

Situation	Verdict
Adult you have never met (shop, street, phone)	VOUS, always
Any official: préfecture, bank, doctor, police	VOUS, non-negotiable
Your boss or a client	VOUS, until explicitly invited
A colleague your age, informal team	usually TU, follow the room
A child or young teenager	TU
A friend's friend, at a dinner	TU in casual settings, VOUS if clearly older
Your in-laws	VOUS first. Wait for the invitation. It may take years.
Online: forums, gaming, most social media	TU
A dog. Any dog.	TU (the owner: VOUS)
In doubt	VOUS. Too formal is polite; too familiar is not.

02. Switching to tu, gracefully

French	English	Who says it
On peut se tutoyer ?	Shall we switch to "tu"?	either side, once things warm up
Tu peux me tutoyer, hein.	You can say "tu" to me, you know.	the senior or older person, inviting
Je te tutoie, ça te va ?	I'll use "tu", is that OK?	casual contexts
Excusez-moi... enfin, excuse-moi !	Sorry... I mean, sorry!	everyone, mid-switch, laughing

The rule of who offers: the older or more senior person proposes the tu. If you are the newcomer, you wait.

03. What each one actually signals

VOUS is not coldness: it is respect, a distance you have not yet earned the right to close. TU given too early does not feel friendly, it feels invasive, like using a first name plus a shoulder squeeze at a job interview. When a French person offers you the tu, that is a real door opening. Notice it.

04. Verb quick-map

Verb	TU form	VOUS form
être	tu es	vous êtes
avoir	tu as	vous avez
aller	tu vas	vous allez



Verb	TU form	VOUS form
pouvoir	tu peux	vous pouvez
vouloir	tu veux	vous voulez
Imperative: come!	viens !	venez !
Imperative: excuse me	excuse-moi	excusez-moi

05. Traps that out you as a foreigner

1. Vous with your partner's parents, until THEY change it. 2. Tu with a waiter you do not know: no. 3. Mixing both in one sentence (« Tu pouvez... ») happens to everyone when tired: laugh, restart. 4. Vous is also simply the plural: « vous venez ? » to three friends is still informal, just plural. Context does the work.

Go deeper: frenchtoenglish.com/translate-french-tu-vous-politeness-english » the full politeness system, free.