Chapter 1

Been There, Done That: Passé Proche and Passé Composé

In This Chapter

▶ Using the near past

▶ Forming the **passé composé** with **avoir** or **être**

▶ Using the **passé composé** negatively

*W*hen you want to say that something just happened, you need the **passé proche** (*near past*). This tense uses the verb **venir** (*to come*) followed by the preposition **de** and an infinitive verb. However, when you want to tell someone what you've accomplished, where you've been, and whom you met yesterday, last week, last month, or even years ago, then you need the **passé compose**. This tense recounts events that were completed at a specific time in the past. The **passé composé** is conjugated with an auxiliary verb — either **avoir** or **être** — plus the past participle. This chapter explains all about auxiliary verbs and how to say you just did something or that you did something at a precise point of time.

We cover other ways to talk about the past in the next two chapters. Chapter 2 of Book V covers what used to happen, and Chapter 3 of Book V covers what had happened, would have happened, or will have happened.

Just Finished: Creating the Near Past Tense

When you want to emphasize that something just occurred, form the near past tense with the following:

✔ The verb **venir** conjugated in the present tense

✔ The preposition **de**

✔ An infinitive verb

Venir by itself means *to come,* but when it's followed by **de** + infinitive, it means *to have just done something.* The following table shows the verb **acheter** (*to buy*) in the near past tense.

acheter (*to buy*)	
je **viens d'acheter**	nous **venons d'acheter**
tu **viens d'acheter**	vous **venez d'acheter**
il/elle/on **vient d'acheter**	ils/elles **viennent d'acheter**
Nous **venons d'acheter** les billets. (*We just bought the tickets.*)	

To construct the immediate past with reflexive verbs, just place the reflexive pronoun before the infinitive, like so (check out Chapter 3 of Book IV for details on reflexive verbs):

Je viens de me réveiller. (*I just woke up.*)

Elle vient de se coucher. (*She has just gone to bed.*)

To make the immediate past negative, simply place **ne** before the conjugated verb (**venir**) and put **pas** (or any other negative word you want to use) after the conjugated verb:

Ils ne viennent pas de manger ? (*Didn't they just eat?*)

Explaining What Happened: Forming the Passé Composé

The **passé composé** is a compound tense that has three meanings in English. **J'ai parlé**, for example, means *I spoke, I have spoken,* and *I did speak.* Here's how to form the **passé composé**:

✔ Conjugate the auxiliary verb in the present tense

✔ Add the past participle

The French language has only two auxiliary verbs for the **passé composé**: **avoir** (*to have*) and **être** (*to be*). Most verbs take the auxiliary **avoir**; however, certain verbs take **être**, especially those that express motion, such as **aller** (*to go*), **partir** (*to leave*), and **venir** (*to come*).

Sounds simple enough, right? In this section, we start with verbs that take **avoir** as their auxiliary (we cover the other verbs later in "Creating the Passé Composé with Être"). See the following table for a review of **avoir** in the present tense, and read on for info on forming past participles and sorting out agreement.

avoir (*to have*)	
j'**ai**	nous **avons**
tu **as**	vous **avez**
il/elle/on **a**	ils/elles **ont**

Creating past participles

To form the **passé composé**, you take the present tense of the auxiliary verb and add the appropriate past participle. This section explains how to form the past participles of regular and irregular verbs.

Past participles of regular verbs

Here's how to form the past participles of regular verbs:

✔ **Regular -er verbs:** To form the past participle of a regular **-er** verb, such as **parler** (*to speak*), simply drop the **-er** and add an **-é**, like so: **parlé**.

Even verbs with spelling changes in the present tense, such as **jeter** (*to throw*), **acheter** (*to buy*), **essayer** (*to try*), and **espérer** (*to hope*), have regular past participles: **jeté**, **acheté**, **essayé**, and **espéré**. (See Chapter 3 of Book III for info on spelling-change verbs.)

✔ **Regular -ir verbs:** For the regular **-ir** verbs, such as **finir** (*to finish*), simply drop the **-r**, and voilà: **fini**.

✔ **Regular -re verbs:** Regular **-re** verbs, like **vendre** (*to sell*), drop the -**re** and add a -**u**: **vendu**.

The following tables show three regular verbs conjugated in the **passé composé** (a present-tense auxiliary verb + the past participle). Note that each verb has **avoir** as its auxiliary.

parler (*to speak*)	
j'**ai parlé**	nous **avons parlé**
tu **as parlé**	vous **avez parlé**
il/elle/on **a parlé**	ils/elles **ont parlé**
Nous **avons parlé** aux enfants. (*We spoke/have spoken/did speak to the children.*)	

finir (*to finish*)	
j'**ai fini**	nous **avons fini**
tu **as fini**	vous **avez fini**
il/elle/on **a fini**	ils/elles **ont fini**
Elle **a fini** ses devoirs. (*She finished/has finished/did finish her homework.*)	

vendre (*to sell*)	
j'**ai vendu**	nous **avons vendu**
tu **as vendu**	vous **avez vendu**
il/elle/on **a vendu**	ils/elles **ont vendu**
Les étudiants **ont vendu** leurs livres. (*The students sold/have sold/did sell their books.*)	

Past participles of irregular verbs

Many French verbs have an irregular past participle. Usually, if a verb is irregular in the present tense (see Chapter 3 of Book III), then it also has an irregular past participle.

However, irregular verbs that follow the same conjugation pattern as **partir** (*to leave*) have regular past participles. These verbs include **sortir** (*to go out*), **dormir** (*to sleep*), **mentir** (*to lie*), and **servir** (*to serve*). For the **-ir** verbs like **partir**, just drop the **-r**. Similarly, **aller** (*to go*) has a regular past participle: Just drop the **-er** and add **-é**.

In the following tables, we've grouped the verbs with irregular past participles according to their endings. Many irregular verbs (those ending in **-oir**, **-re**, or **-ir**) have a past participle that ends in **u** — see Table 1-1.

Table 1-1	Irregular Verbs and Their Past Participles Ending in u
Infinitive	*Past Participle*
apercevoir (*to see, to perceive*)	**aperçu**
appartenir (*to belong to*)	**appartenu**
avoir (*to have*)	**eu**
battre (*to beat*)	**battu**
boire (*to drink*)	**bu**
connaître (*to know*)	**connu**
convaincre (*to convince*)	**convaincu**
courir (*to run*)	**couru**
croire (*to believe*)	**cru**
décevoir (to disappoint)	**déçu**
devenir (*to become*)	**devenu**
devoir (*to owe, to have to*)	**dû**
falloir (*to be necessary, to have to*)	**fallu**
lire (*to read*)	**lu**
paraître (*to appear*)	**paru**
plaire (*to please*)	**plu**
pleuvoir (*to rain*)	**plu**
pouvoir (*to be able to*)	**pu**
recevoir (*to receive*)	**reçu**
revenir (*to come back*)	**revenu**
savoir (*to know*)	**su**
tenir (*to hold*)	**tenu**
venir (*to come*)	**venu**
vivre (*to live*)	**vécu**
voir (*to see*)	**vu**
vouloir (*to want*)	**voulu**

Some past participles end in **t**. Table 1-2 shows some of those verbs along with their past participles.

Table 1-2   Irregular Verbs and Their Past Participles Ending in t

Infinitive	Past Participle
conduire (*to drive*)	**conduit**
construire (*to construct, to build*)	**construit**
couvrir (*to cover*)	**couvert**
dire (*to say*)	**dit**
écrire (*to write*)	**écrit**
faire (*to do, to make*)	**fait**
inscrire (*to note, to write down*)	**inscrit**
offrir (*to offer*)	**offert**
ouvrir (*to open*)	**ouvert**
souffrir (*to suffer*)	**souffert**

Table 1-3 lists some irregular verbs whose past participles end in **s**. Note the pattern for verbs that end in **-mettre** or **prendre**.

Table 1-3   Irregular Verbs and Their Past Participles Ending in s

Infinitive	Past Participle
mettre (*to put, to place*)	**mis**
admettre (*to admit*)	**admis**
prendre (*to take*)	**pris**
apprendre (*to learn*)	**appris**

Some past participles of irregular verbs end in **i**. See Table 1-4.

Table 1-4   Irregular Verbs and Their Past Participles Ending in i

Infinitive	Past Participle
rire (*to laugh*)	**ri**
sourire (*to smile*)	**souri**
suivre (*to follow, to take a course*)	**suivi**

Table 1-5 shows four other irregular verbs whose past participles you're likely to encounter.

Table 1-5	Other Irregular Verbs and Their Past Participles
Infinitive	*Past Participle*
avoir (*to have*)	**eu**
être (*to be*)	**été**
mourir (*to die*)	**mort**
naître (*to be born*)	**né**

Making past participles agree with direct objects

If a verb is conjugated in the **passé composé** with the auxiliary **avoir** and there happens to be a direct object before that verb, then the past participle needs to agree with the direct object. Make the following changes to the past participle, depending on the direct object's gender and number:

✔ If the preceding direct object is masculine singular, then leave the past participle alone.

✔ If it's feminine singular, add an **-e** to the past participle.

✔ If it's masculine plural, add an **-s** to the past participle.

✔ If it's feminine plural, add an **-es** to the past participle.

Check out the following example to see how the past participle can change:

J'ai mis les fleurs dans le vase. (*I put the flowers in the vase.*) In this example, the past participle doesn't need to agree because the direct object, **les fleurs**, comes after the verb.

Je les ai mises dans le vase. (*I put them in the vase.*) Here you replace the direct object **les fleurs**, which is feminine plural, with the direct-object pronoun **les**. Because the direct object now comes before the verb, you have to make the past participle **mis** agree with **les** (feminine plural) by adding **-e** for feminine and **-s** for plural; therefore, the past participle is spelled **mises**.

Here's another example:

Il a vu Nicole. (*He saw Nicole.*) The direct object **Nicole** comes after the verb, so the past participle **vu** doesn't need to agree with it.

Il l'a vue. (*He saw her.*) To replace the direct object **Nicole**, which is feminine singular, with the direct object pronoun **la**, which means *her,* place the direct-object pronoun **la** before the verb (**la** contracts to **l'** because it's before a vowel). Then make the past participle **vu** agree with **l'** (feminine singular) by adding **e** to it; therefore, it's spelled **vue**.

Table 1-6 lists direct-object pronouns always placed before the verb, except in the affirmative imperative (commands to do something).

REMEMBER Drop the vowel of **me**, **te**, **le**, and **la** and add an apostrophe when the verb begins with a vowel or a mute **h**. In the **passé composé** when the auxiliary is **avoir**, this is always the case.

Table 1-6	Direct-Object Pronouns
French Pronoun	*English Equivalent*
me (m')	*me*
te (t')	*you*
le (l')	*him/it*
la (l')	*her/it*
nous	*us*
vous	*you*
les	*them*

WARNING! The pronouns **me**, **te**, **nous**, and **vous** sometimes act as indirect objects instead of direct objects, so be careful — the past participle that follows the auxiliary **avoir** must agree with these pronouns only if they're direct objects. Look at the following sentences in the **passé composé** and notice where the past participle agrees:

Le travail, nous l'avons fini. (*The work, we finished it.*) — agrees with **le** (which refers to **le travail**)

La robe, nous l'avons finie. (*The dress, we finished it.*) — agrees with **la** (which refers to **la robe**)

Ils m'ont prévenu(e). (*They warned me.*) — agrees with **me**

Il nous a téléphoné. (*He called us.*) — does not agree

Remember that indirect objects mean *to/for someone.* To figure out whether the pronouns are direct or indirect objects of the verb, reason it out as follows: In the sentence **Ils m'ont prévenue** (*They warned me*), the verb **prévenir** is in the **passé composé** and follows the auxiliary verb **avoir**. Try rewriting the sentence to include a name instead of the pronoun **me**. For

example, ask yourself whether the verb **prévenir** introduces a person like Jean directly or with the preposition **à**. In other words, is the sentence saying **Ils ont prévenu à Jean** or **Ils ont prévenu Jean**? The fact that the correct sentence is **Ils ont prévenu Jean** — without **à** — indicates that the verb **prévenir** introduces a direct object; therefore **me** (**m'**) is a direct object. The past participle **prévenu** must agree with **me** (**m'**) in this sentence. If you're male, the past participle remains the same, but if you're female, it takes an **e**.

In the sentence **Il nous a téléphoné** (*He called us*), the verb **téléphoner** is in the **passé composé** and follows the auxiliary verb **avoir**. Ask yourself whether the verb **téléphoner** introduces a person like Jean directly or with the preposition **à**. In other words, is the sentence **Il téléphone à Jean** or **Il téléphone Jean**? The fact that the correct sentence is **Il téléphone à Jean** indicates that the verb **téléphoner** introduces an indirect object; therefore, **nous** is an indirect object. The past participle **téléphoné** doesn't agree with **nous** (plural) in this sentence.

To check whether a verb is followed by **à**, look at a dictionary or see Chapter 1 of Book IV.

Creating the Passé Composé with Être

Some specific verbs, such as verbs of motion, are intransitive and take the auxiliary verb **être** (*to be*). An *intransitive verb* is one that isn't followed by a direct object. To form the **passé composé** with these verbs, conjugate the verb **être** in the present tense and add the past participle of the verb you want:

> **Il est arrivé à 9 heures.** (*He arrived at 9 o'clock.*)
>
> **Elle est montée dans sa chambre.** (*She went up to her room.*)

Note that with **être** verbs, the past participle agrees in gender and number with the subject.
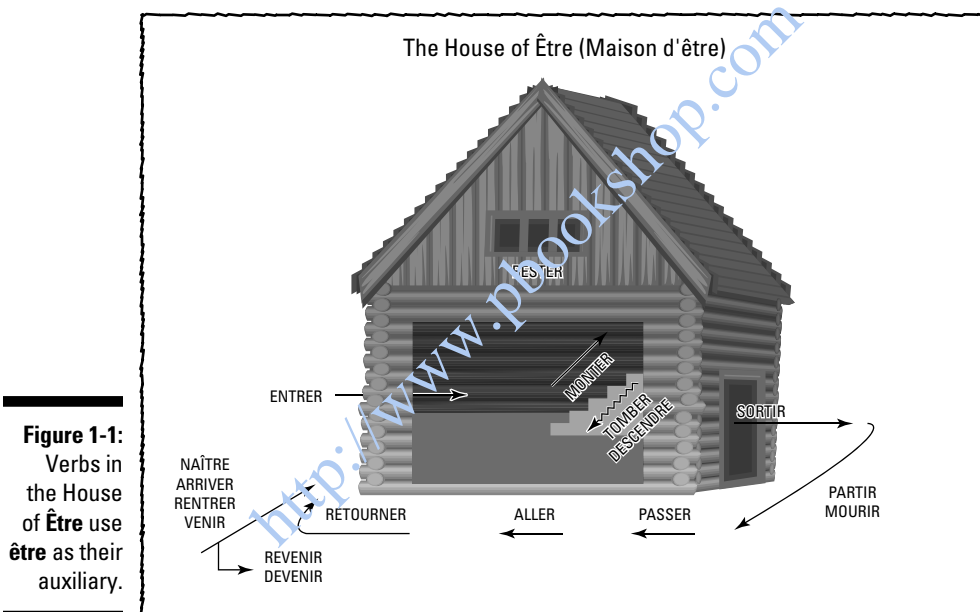
See the following table for a review of **être** in the present tense. Then read on for info on which verbs take **être** in the **passé composé** and how to make past participles agree.

être (*to be*)	
je **suis**	nous **sommes**
tu **es**	vous **êtes**
il/elle/on **est**	ils/elles **sont**

Knowing which verbs take être

TIP

To remember which verbs take the auxiliary verb **être** in the **passé composé** (and other compound tenses), visualize the **Maison d'être,** or *House of Être* (see Figure 5-1). Picture a huge door and an elegant staircase. Many of the verbs that take **être** are what we call "door" verbs. You can *go, come, return, enter, arrive,* and *pass* through the door in the House of **Être**. What about the staircase? You can *go up* or *go down,* and if you aren't careful, you can *fall.* Now think of the house as your world and of **naître** and **mourir** as coming into and leaving that world, and you will have a visual image of all **être** verbs. The French equivalents of all these verbs take **être**.

The House of Être (Maison d'être)

RESTER

ENTRER

MONTER

TOMBER
DESCENDRE

SORTIR

NAÎTRE
ARRIVER
RENTRER
VENIR

RETOURNER   ALLER   PASSER

PARTIR
MOURIR

REVENIR
DEVENIR

Figure 1-1: Verbs in the House of **Être** use **être** as their auxiliary.

Illustration by Wiley, Composition Services Graphics

Table 1-7 shows the verbs that use **être** when forming the **passé composé** along with the past participles of these verbs. The verbs marked with an asterisk can take either **avoir** or **être**. They take the auxiliary **avoir** when they're followed by a direct object and **être** when they aren't. We further explain the difference in the later section "Flexible Verbs: Using Either Avoir or Être"

Besides the verbs in the House of Être, all reflexive verbs use **être** as their auxiliary. See the later section "Understanding agreement with pronominal verbs" for details.

Table 1-7	Past Participles of the Verbs in the House of Être
Infinitive	*Past Participle*
aller (*to go*)	**allé**
arriver (*to arrive*)	**arrivé**
descendre* (*to go down stairs, to descend*)	**descendu**
devenir (*to become*)	**devenu**
entrer (*to enter*)	**entré**
monter* (*to go up stairs, to climb*)	**monté**
mourir (*to die*)	**mort**
naître (*to be born*)	**né**
partir (*to leave*)	**parti**
passer* (*to pass, to spend*)	**passé**
rentrer* (*to come back home*)	**rentré**
rester (*to stay*)	**resté**
retourner* (*to return*)	**retourné**
revenir (*to come back*)	**revenu**
sortir* (*to go out*)	**sorti**
tomber (*to fall*)	**tombé**
venir (*to come*)	**venu**

Making the subject and past participle agree

REMEMBER

The past participles of **être** verbs usually agree with the subject. If the subject is masculine singular, leave the past participle alone. Otherwise, add **-e** to make the participle feminine, **-s** to make it masculine plural, or **-es** to make it feminine plural.

Look at the verb **partir** (*to leave*) conjugated in the **passé composé**. You conjugate **être** in the present tense, add the past partciple **parti** (the infinitive **partir** minus **-r**), and make the participle agree with the subject.

partir (*to leave*)	
je **suis parti(e)**	nous **sommes parti(s/es)**
tu **es parti(e)**	vous êtes **parti(e/s/es)**
il/elle/on **est parti(e)**	ils/elles **sont parti(s/es)**
Phillipe et moi, nous **sommes partis** à midi. (*We left at noon.*)	

Understanding agreement with pronominal verbs

REMEMBER

All pronominal verbs — verbs that take reflexive pronouns — take **être** as their auxiliary in the **passé composé**. However, the past participle follows that same rule of agreement as the verbs taking **avoir**. The past participle agrees with the preceding direct object if the sentence has one. Read on for details on agreement. (For more info on reflexive pronouns and pronominal verbs, flip to Chapter 3 of Book IV.)

Agreeing with the reflexive pronoun

In most sentences with pronominal verbs, the reflexive pronoun (which corresponds to the subject) acts as the direct object. If this is the case, add **-e** to the past participle if the pronoun is feminine, **-s** if it's plural, or **-es** if it's feminine plural.

The following example conjugates **se coucher** (*to go to bed*) in the **passé composé**.

se coucher (*to go to bed*)	
je **me suis couché(e)**	nous **nous sommes couché(s/es)**
tu **t'es couché(e)**	vous **vous êtes couché(e/s/es)**
il/elle/on **s'est couché(e)**	ils/elles **se sont couché(s/es)**
Les filles **se sont couchées** à dix heures. (*The girls went to bed at 10 o'clock.*)	

Avoiding agreement with other direct objects

REMEMBER

If the sentence has a direct object other than the reflexive pronoun, then the reflexive pronoun is an indirect object and the past participle doesn't have to agree with it. Take the verb **se laver** (*to wash oneself*). When the verb isn't followed by a direct object, the past participle agrees with the reflexive pronoun. However, when the same verb is followed by a direct object, the reflexive pronoun is acting as the indirect object and you don't have agreement. Check out the following examples:

Je **me suis lavé(e).** (*I washed myself.*)

Je **me suis lavé** les cheveux. (*I washed my hair.*)

Elle **s'est lavée.** (*She washed herself.*)

Elle **s'est lavé** les cheveux. (*She washed her hair.*)

REMEMBER

Past participles don't agree with indirect objects. This rule applies to verbs taking the auxiliary **avoir** as well as to pronominal verbs. Table 1-8 shows the indirect-object pronouns.

Table 1-8	Indirect-Object Pronouns
French Pronoun	*English Equivalent*
me	*to me*
te	*to you*
se	*to himself/herself/themselves* (for pronominal verbs only)
lui	*to him/her*
nous	*to us*
vous	*to you*
leur	*to them*

WARNING!

Lui and **leur** are always indirect objects, but the reflexive pronouns **me, te, se, nous,** and **vous** can be direct- or indirect-object pronouns.

To figure out whether these pronouns are direct or indirect objects of the verb, reason it out as follows: In the sentence **Marie et Jean se sont parlé** (*Marie and Jean spoke to each other*), the verb **parler** is in the **passé composé** and in the reflexive form. It's conjugated with the auxiliary verb **être.** Ask yourself whether the verb **parler** introduces a person like Jean directly or with the preposition **à.** In other words, is the sentence saying **Marie parle à Jean** or **Marie parle Jean**? The fact that the correct sentence includes **à Jean** indicates that the verb **parler** introduces an indirect object; therefore, **se** is an indirect object, so the past participle **parlé** doesn't agree with **se** in this sentence.

In the sentence **Marie et Jean se sont regardés** (*Marie and Jean looked at each other*), the verb **regarder** is in the **passé composé** and in the reflexive form. It's conjugated with the auxiliary verb **être.** Ask yourself whether the verb **regarder** introduces a person like Jean directly or with the preposition **à.** In other words, would you say **Marie regarde à Jean** or **Marie regarde Jean**? The fact that the correct sentence is **Marie regarde Jean** indicates that the verb **regarder** introduces a direct object; therefore, **se** is the direct object, and the past participle **regardés** must agree with **se** (plural) in this sentence.

The following examples in the **passé composé** all have indirect objects rather than direct objects before the verbs, so the past participles don't agree:

Vous vous êtes dit au revoir. (*You said goodbye to each other.*) **Dire à** is to say something to someone, so **vous** is an indirect object.

Ils se sont juré de toujours dire la vérité. (*They swore each other to always tell the truth*.) **Jurer à** is to swear something to someone, so **se** is an indirect object.

Elle s'est rendu compte que la nuit tombait. (*She realized that night was falling.*) Within the expression **se rendre compte** (*to account for something*), the word **compte** (the something to account for) is the direct object of **rendre**, so **s'** is an indirect object.

To check whether a French verb has to be followed by an indirect object (**à** + a person), see Chapter 1 of Book IV or use a dictionary.

Some pronominal verbs have reflexive pronouns that are always indirect-object pronouns. In this case, the past participle doesn't ever agree with the pronouns. Table 1-9 shows these verbs.

Table 1-9	Pronominal Verbs with Indirect-Object Pronouns
Verb	*Translation*
s'acheter	*to buy for oneself or for each other*
s'écrire	*to write for oneself or to each other*
se demander	*to wonder*
se dire	*to say to oneself or to each other*
se donner	*to give to oneself or to each other*
se parler	*to speak to oneself or to each other*
se promettre	*to promise oneself or each other*
se rendre compte de + [noun] **se rendre compte que + [subject + verb]**	*to realize [something]* *to realize that [subject + verb]*
se rendre visite	*to visit each other*
se ressembler	*to look alike, to resemble each other*
se sourire	*to smile to oneself or at each other*
se téléphoner	*to call each other*

Flexible Verbs: Using Either Avoir or Être

The verbs **descendre**, **monter**, **passer**, **rentrer**, **retourner**, and **sortir** can take either auxiliary — **avoir** or **être** in the **passé composé**. The choice depends on how you're using the verb. If the verb is followed by a direct object, then it's transitive and it takes **avoir** as its auxiliary. If it isn't followed by a direct object, then it's intransitive and takes **être** as its auxiliary. The verbs translate differently into English depending on your choice of auxiliary. See the examples in Table 1-10.

Table 1-10	Verbs That Take Either Auxiliary	
Verb	*Transitive (Avoir)*	*Intransitive (Être)*
passer	Elle **a passé** un examen. (*She took an exam.*)	Elle **est passée** par la bibliothèque. (*She passed by the library.*)
descendre	Elle **a descendu** les livres. (*She brought down the books.*)	Elle **est descendue** au sous-sol. (*She went down to the basement.*)
monter	Elle **a monté** la valise. (*She brought up the suitcase.*)	Elle **est montée** dans un taxi. (*She got in a taxi.*)
sortir	Elle **a sorti** le chien. (*She took out the dog.*)	Elle **est sortie** avec ses amis. (*She went out with her friends.*)
rentrer	Elle **a rentré** la voiture. (*She put the car in.*)	Elle **est rentrée** à minuit. (*She came home at midnight.*)
retourner	Elle **a retourné** les crêpes. (*She turned over the crepes.*)	Elle **est retournée** à son livre. (*She returned to her book/ reading.*)

Didn't Happen: Making the Passé Composé Negative

If you want to say that you didn't do something or you didn't go anywhere, you make the **passé composé** negative. Just place **ne** before the auxiliary, which is the conjugated verb, and **pas** after the auxiliary:

Je n'ai pas voyagé. (*I didn't travel.*)

Nous n'avons pas lu le journal. (*We didn't read the newspaper.*)

For pronominal verbs, the **ne** precedes not only the auxiliary verb but also the reflexive pronoun, and the **pas** follows the auxiliary:

Tu ne t'es pas couché(e). (*You didn't go to bed.*)

Nous ne nous sommes pas amusés. (*We didn't have fun.*)

Check Chapter 5 of Book III for more on negatives.