By now, you will have seen that in French, there are variations of the letter “e” with four different accents: é, è, ê, and ë.

These accented characters can be easily grouped into two pronunciations: the open “e” [ɛ] and the closed “e” [e]. The closed “e” [e] sound is made anytime you see an “e” with an accent aigu (é). The open “e” [ɛ] sound is made any time you see an “e” with an accent grave (è), a circonflexe (ê), or a tréma (ë). When making the open “e” sound, there will be more physical space in your mouth than when making the closed “e” sound.

French learners might find this difference hard to hear at first, but as you continue listening to French, you’ll start to hear the difference more easily, especially if you know how to identify when each sound is made.

### The open “e” [ɛ]:

- Any è, ê, or ë in a word
  - *première* (first)
  - *Noël* (Christmas)
  - *la forêt* (forest)

- *ai* + another letter
  - *laid* (ugly)
  - *français* (French)
  - *le lait* (milk)

- *e* + a pronounced consonant
  - *cher* (expensive)
  - *avec* (with)
  - *un criminel* (criminal)

- The word *est* (a form of être)

### The closed “e” [e]:

- Any é occurs in a word
  - *écouter* (to listen)
  - *j’ai parlé* (I spoke)
  - *le thé* (tea)

- Words ending in -*ai*
  - *j’ai* (I have)
  - *un quai* (train platform)
  - *mai* (May)

- Words ending in -*et, -er, or -ez*
  - *un billet* (a ticket)
  - *premier* (first)
  - *parler* (to speak)
  - *parlez* ((you) speak)

The word *et* (and)

As you practice speaking, even if you aren’t sure you’re making the right sound, at least make sure you know whether the word you’re saying is supposed to have an open “e” [ɛ] or a closed “e” [e].

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