

“What Are You Doing?” The French Way

Navigating Context, Formality, and Tone

The Core Confusion

For English speakers, asking “What are you doing?” is a one-size-fits-all question. But in French, direct translation gets complicated fast:

- **Context is King:** The phrase changes entirely based on who you are talking to (formality) and where you are.
- **Double Meaning:** In French, there is absolutely no difference between “What are you doing right now?” and “What do you do [for a living]?”

The Natural Solution

To speak naturally, stop translating word-for-word and start matching your phrase to your social setting:

- 1. Master the “Safe” Standard:**
When in doubt, stick to standard French. Use **Qu’est-ce que vous faites ?**—it is perfectly appropriate in all contexts and keeps you safely polite.
- 2. Keep it Casual (Spoken French):**
In informal situations with friends, family, or close coworkers, drop the formalities. A simple **Tu fais quoi ?** is all you need.
- 3. Elevate for Elegance (Formal French):**
When you need to sound sophisticated, academic, or highly polite, invert the words. Use **Que faites-vous ?** to instantly elevate your tone.

Practice Challenge: Test Your French

Apply the right context to the right phrase!

Part 1: Match the Context

Draw a line to connect the social setting with the correct French structure.

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|---|---|---|
| 1. Spoken French
(Informal / Singular) ● | ● | • A. Qu'est-ce que vous faites ? |
| 2. Standard French
(Formal / Plural) ● | ● | • B. Que fais-tu ? |
| 3. Formal French
(Informal / Singular) ● | ● | • C. Tu fais quoi ? |

Part 2: Multiple Choice

How do you ask, "What do you do for a living?" using Standard French?

- A. Tu fais quoi demain ?
- B. Qu'est-ce que tu fais dans la vie ?
- C. Que faites-vous plus tard ?

Part 3: Fill in the Blank

Test your memory on the exact phrasing!

1. Casual / Plural: "Vous _____ quoi samedi soir ?"
2. Formal / Plural: "_____ faites-vous plus tard ?"