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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The French Fencing Terminology Guide



The essential French terms used by coaches, referees, and fencers worldwide – pronounced, defined, and explained so you never feel lost when someone says, "prise de fer" or "remise en garde."

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A Note from Coach Derek

Fencing was codified in France and Italy, and the technical language of the sport remains overwhelmingly French. When your coach says "flèche," the referee calls "halte," or a fencing manual describes a "coulé," they're using French terms that have specific, precise meanings – meanings that don't always translate neatly into English.

This guide covers the French terms you'll encounter as a competitive fencer. It's organized by category so you can find what you need quickly, and every term includes a pronunciation guide and a plain-language explanation. You don't need to memorize every term today. But keep this guide in your fencing bag and pull it out whenever you hear something you don't recognize.

The Fencing Glossary (doc 01 in this series) defines terms in English. This guide is specifically for the French terminology that coaches, referees, and international fencing culture use constantly.

– Coach Derek

Commands and Referee Calls

These are the French words you'll hear from the referee during every bout. Knowing them is not optional — they're the language of competition.

En garde (on-GARD): The command to take the ready position. The referee says this before each touch to tell both fencers to get into their starting stance. Also refers to the stance itself.

Êtes-vous prêts? / Prêtes? (et-voO-PREH / PRET): "Are you ready?" The referee asks this after "En garde" and before starting the action. The masculine form is "prêts," the feminine form is "prêtes." If you're not ready, say so now.

Allez (ah-LAY): "Go" or "Fence." The command to begin fencing. After "En garde" and "Prêts," "Allez" starts the action. In English-language refereeing, you'll often hear "Fence" instead.

Halte (AHLT): "Halt" or "Stop." The command to stop fencing immediately. Both fencers must freeze when they hear this. The referee calls halt when a touch is scored, when the action leaves the strip, or when they need to stop the bout for any reason.

Touche (TOOSH): "Touch." A valid hit that scores a point. When the referee awards a touch, they indicate which fencer scored.

Pas de touche (pah-duh-TOOSH): "No touch." The referee's call when lights go on but no point is awarded — either because of an off-target hit in foil, a simultaneous action in foil/saber, or a rule violation.

Touche à droite / à gauche (ah-DRWAHT / ah-GOHS): "Touch right / touch left." The referee awards the touch to the fencer on their right or left side.

Attaque à droite / à gauche (ah-TAHK): "Attack right / attack left." The referee identifies which fencer's attack had priority.

Coup double (koo-DOO-bluh): "Double touch." In épée, when both fencers score within 40ms. Both touches count.

Action simultanée (ak-see-OHN see-mool-tah-NAY): "Simultaneous action." In foil and saber, when both fencers attack at the same time with no distinguishable priority. No touch is awarded.

Remise en garde (reh-MEEZ on-GARD): "Return to en garde." The command to go back to the starting lines, usually after a halt.



Offensive Actions

The French terms for attacks and offensive blade actions. These are the terms your coach and fencing manuals use to describe what you do when you're scoring.

Attaque (ah-TAHK): The attack. The initial offensive action made with forward movement and arm extension toward the target. The action that establishes right-of-way in foil and saber.

Attaque composée (kohm-poh-ZAY): Compound attack. An attack with one or more feints before the final blade action. Examples: one-two, doublé, feint-disengage.

Attaque simple (SIM-pluh): Simple attack. A direct attack with no feints – a single blade action that scores. The direct thrust, the disengage, and the coupé are all simple attacks.

Coup droit (koo-DRWAH): "Straight hit." The direct attack – extending the arm and delivering the point or cut in a straight line to the target without any blade manipulation.

Dégagement (day-gahj-MAHN): Disengage. Moving the blade from one line to another by passing under or over the opponent's blade. A fingertip action used to avoid a parry or change the line of attack.

Coupé (koo-PAY): Cut-over. Moving the blade from one line to another by passing over the opponent's blade tip (rather than under, as in the disengage). A less common alternative to the disengage.

Battement (baht-MAHN): Beat. A sharp, percussive strike against the opponent's blade to knock it aside, usually followed immediately by an attack into the opened line.

Froissement (frwah-MAHN): A strong, sliding action down the opponent's blade from forte to foible, deflecting it forcefully. More aggressive than a beat.

Coulé / Glissement (koo-LAY / glee-MAHN): Graze or glide. A smooth, sliding action along the opponent's blade while extending the arm for an attack. The blade maintains contact throughout, steering the opponent's blade aside.

Bind / Liement (lee-MAHN): A blade action that captures the opponent's blade and carries it from one line to another while maintaining contact. Also called "transport."

Prise de fer (preez-duh-FAIR): "Taking the blade." The general term for any action that seizes and controls the opponent's blade: the bind, the croisé, and the enveloppement are all prises de fer.

Croisé (krwah-ZAY): A prise de fer that carries the opponent's blade from high line to low line (or vice versa) on the same side.

Enveloppement (on-veh-lop-MAHN): A circular prise de fer that takes the opponent's blade and carries it in a full circle, returning it to the original line but now under your control.

Flèche (FLESH): "Arrow." A running attack where the back foot crosses in front of the front foot and the fencer sprints past the opponent. Legal in foil and épée, banned in saber.

Fente (FAHNT): Lunge. The fundamental attacking footwork action where the front foot drives forward while the back leg extends.

Feinte (FANT): Feint. A false attack designed to draw the opponent's defensive reaction, creating an opening for the real attack. Not to be confused with "fente" (lunge).

Remise (reh-MEEZ): A renewed attack made immediately after the first attack is parried, without withdrawing the arm. The blade stays forward and redirects to a new target.

Redoublement (reh-doo-bluh-MAHN): A renewed attack made after withdrawing the arm and making a new forward motion. Unlike the remise, the redoublement includes a new arm extension.

Reprise d'attaque (reh-PREEZ dah-TAHK): A new attack made after recovering from the previous one. The fencer recovers to en garde and immediately attacks again.

Un-deux (uhn-DUH): "One-two." The fundamental compound attack: a feint in one line followed by a disengage to the opposite line when the opponent parries. In English, often simply called "the one-two."

Double (doo-BLAY): A compound attack with two disengages. Feint, disengage (opponent parries), disengage again (opponent takes second parry), and finish in the original line.



Defensive Actions

Parade / Parry (pah-RAHD): A defensive blade action that deflects the opponent's attacking blade. Parries are numbered by position: quarte (4), sixte (6), tierce (3), seconde (2), quinte (5), septime (7), octave (8), prime (1).

Quarte (KAHRT): Parry 4. Defends the inside high line (the chest on the non-weapon-arm side). The most important foil parry.

Sixte (SEEST): Parry 6. Defends the outside high line (the chest on the weapon-arm side). Together with quarte, forms the primary foil defensive system.

Tierce (tee-AIRS): Parry 3. Defends the outside line with a pronated hand. Used more in épée and saber than foil.

Seconde (seh-KOHN): Parry 2. Defends the low outside line. In saber, defends the belly.

Quinte (KANT): Parry 5. Defends the head. The most important saber parry. The blade is held horizontally above the head.

Septime (set-TEEM): Parry 7. Defends the inside low line. Less common but used in épée against low-line attacks.

Octave (ok-TAHV): Parry 8. Defends the outside low line. Used in épée against attacks to the thigh or low flank.

Prime (PREEM): Parry 1. The oldest parry, defending the inside low line with a downward sweeping motion. Rarely used in modern competition.

Contre-parade (KON-truh pah-RAHD): Counter-parry or circular parry. A parry that describes a circle with the blade, capturing the opponent's blade regardless of which line the attack is in.

Riposte (ree-POST): The offensive action made immediately after a successful parry. The riposte has right-of-way in foil and saber.

Contre-riposte (KON-truh ree-POST): Counter-riposte. An offensive action made after parrying the opponent's riposte. The exchange goes: attack → parry → riposte → counter-parry → counter-riposte.

Arrêt (ah-REH): Stop hit or counterattack. An offensive action made into the opponent's attack without first parrying. In foil and saber, it must arrive clearly before the attack to score.

Point en ligne (PWAHN on LEE-nyuh): Point-in-line. The extended arm with the point threatening the opponent's valid target, established before the opponent's attack begins. Has right-of-way in foil and saber if properly maintained.



Footwork Terms

Marche (MARSH): Advance. Moving forward one step by sliding the front foot forward, then following with the back foot.

Retraite (reh-TRET): Retreat. Moving backward one step by sliding the back foot backward, then following with the front foot.

Bond en avant (bohn on ah-VAHN): Jump forward. An explosive forward movement where both feet leave the ground simultaneously.

Bond en arrière (bohn on ah-ree-AIR): Jump backward. An explosive backward movement where both feet leave the ground.

Passe avant (PAHS ah-VAHN): Pass forward. Crossing the back foot in front of the front foot. Part of the flèche action.

Appel (ah-PEL): A sharp stamp of the front foot on the strip, used as a preparation to distract the opponent or emphasize the start of an attack.

Balestra (bah-LES-trah): A jump forward immediately followed by a lunge. Italian in origin but universally used. The jump closes distance and the lunge delivers the attack.



Target and Position Terms

Cible (SEE-bluh): Target. The valid hitting area.

Ligne haute (LEE-nyuh OHT): High line. The target area above the weapon hand – roughly the upper chest, shoulder, and mask.

Ligne basse (LEE-nyuh BAHS): Low line. The target area below the weapon hand – roughly the belly, flank, and thigh.

Ligne dedans (duh-DAHNN): Inside line. The target area on the non-weapon-arm side of the body.

Ligne dehors (duh-OR): Outside line. The target area on the weapon-arm side of the body.

Engagement (on-gahj-MAHN): The contact between two blades. When your blade touches the opponent's blade, you are "in engagement."

Absence de fer (ab-SAHNS duh FAIR): "Absence of blade." When neither fencer's blade is in contact with the other. Common in épée, where fencers often keep their blades disengaged.

Forte (FORT): The strong part of the blade, the third closest to the guard. Used for parrying and blade control.

Foible (FWAH-bluh): The weak part of the blade, the third closest to the tip. This is the part that bends and scores.

Milieu (mee-LYUH): The middle third of the blade, between the forte and the foible.

Pronation (pro-NAH-see-ohn): The hand position with the palm facing down (knuckles up). In the clock system, approximately 9–11 o'clock.

Supination (soo-pee-NAH-see-ohn): The hand position with the palm facing up (knuckles down). In the clock system, approximately 1–3 o'clock.



Equipment Terms

Fleuret (fluh-REH): Foil. The light thrusting weapon with a small guard and restricted target (torso only).

Épée (é-PAY): The heavier thrusting weapon with a large bell guard and the entire body as valid target.

Sabre (SAH-bruh): The cutting and thrusting weapon with valid target above the waist.

Lame (LAHM): The conductive vest worn over the jacket in foil and saber. Registers valid target touches on the scoring machine. Not to be confused with the English word "lame."

Plastron (plahs-TROHN): The protective underarm padding worn beneath the jacket. Required safety equipment.

Coquille (koh-KEE-yuh): The guard of the weapon. The bell-shaped or circular metal piece that protects the hand.

Poignée (pwahn-YAY): The grip or handle of the weapon. May be a French grip (straight) or a pistol grip (anatomical).

Piste (PEEST): The fencing strip. The playing area, 14 meters long and 1.5–2 meters wide.

Fil de corps (FEEL duh KOR): Body cord. The electrical wire that connects the weapon to the scoring machine through the fencer's jacket.



Tactical and Bout Terms

Phrase d'armes (FRAHZ DARM): "Phrase of arms." A complete sequence of offensive and defensive actions between two fencers, from the initial attack through the final touch or halt. The fundamental unit of fencing action.

Temps (TAHN): Tempo or time. A single fencing action's duration. Used to describe the timing relationship between actions: "one tempo ahead" means your action completed one full action before the opponent's.

Cadence (kah-DAHNS): The rhythm of a series of movements. Varying the cadence — speeding up or slowing down — is a fundamental tactical tool.

Mesure (meh-ZOOR): Measure or distance. The space between two fencers. "Being at measure" means you're at a distance where you can score with a lunge.

Contre-temps (KON-truh TAHN): Counter-time. A tactical play where you invite the opponent to counterattack, then parry their counterattack and riposte.

Deuxième intention (duh-zee-EM an-tahn-see-OHN): Second intention. Deliberately making an action you expect to fail in order to score on the opponent's response.

Corps à corps (KOR ah KOR): "Body to body." Physical contact between the two fencers. In most situations, the referee halts the action when corps à corps occurs. Deliberately causing it can result in a card.

Priorité (pree-or-ee-TAY): Priority. In foil and saber, the right-of-way that determines which fencer scores when both hit. Also used for the random priority assignment in overtime épée.

Poule (POOL): Pool. The round-robin group stage at the beginning of a tournament where fencers fence everyone in their assigned group.

Élimination directe (ay-lee-mee-nah-see-OHN dee-REKT): Direct elimination. The single-elimination bracket stage after pools. Lose and you're out.

Carton jaune / rouge / noir (kar-TOHN ZHOHN / ROOZH / NWAHR): Yellow / red / black card. The penalty cards described in the Referee Handbook (doc 32).



Salutations and Etiquette

Salut (sah-LOO): Salute. The formal greeting made with the weapon before and after every bout. Required by the rules. Failing to salute can result in a card.

Président (pray-zee-DAH): The referee. Formally called the "président du jury" (president of the jury). In modern usage, simply "the referee."

Directeur de combat (dee-rek-TUHR duh kohm-BAH): "Director of combat." Another formal term for the referee. Less commonly used today.

COACH'S TIP: You don't need to speak French to fence. But learning the key terms – especially the referee commands, the parry numbers, and the common blade actions – makes you a more fluent member of the fencing community. When your coach says "Take sixte and riposte with a coupé," you should know exactly what that means. This guide makes sure you do.



Final Coach's Note

Fencing's French vocabulary is not pretension. It's precision. Every term describes a specific action, position, or concept with an exactness that English translations often lose. "Disengage" is a reasonable English word, but "dégagement" carries centuries of technical meaning about how the blade moves, how the fingers work, and what the tactical purpose is.

You'll absorb most of these terms naturally through coaching and competition. But having this reference means you're never guessing. When a term comes up in a lesson, a manual, or a conversation with another fencer, you can look it up and know exactly what it means.

Fencing is a global sport with a shared language. This guide helps you speak it.

– Coach Derek