French Seed Phrases: Accents and Shared English Words

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French BIP39 words include accents and 100 English overlaps. Learn why language labels and accurate spelling matter for recovery.

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A French BIP39 seed phrase cannot always be identified from one word. The official French list contains 2,048 entries, each five to eight letters long; 366 contain é or è, and exactly 100 are spelled identically to entries in the English list. Those overlaps make the phrase's language part of the information worth recording on your backup.

What distinguishes the French word list

The length and accent counts describe the official BIP39 French list. Count letters in their composed, human-readable form: an accented `é` is one letter, even though its normalized representation can use two Unicode code points. Counting bytes or decomposed code points produces different measurements.

Each BIP39 word represents an index from `0` to `2047`, carrying 11 bits. The language determines which list supplies those indices. A French phrase uses the French list throughout; mixing French and English words is not a standard way to create a bilingual BIP39 backup.

The 100 shared spellings are an intersection of the complete French and English lists. For example, `abandon` appears in both. Its presence alone cannot identify the intended list, and identical spelling does not imply an identical index in both lists.

A word unique to one candidate list can help identify that list, but a shared word cannot identify it by spelling alone. Recovery software should examine the complete phrase against candidate lists and check its checksum. Even then, a checksum detects most errors, not all, and does not guarantee that every possible ambiguity has been resolved.

How accents affect recovery

Preserve every accent when copying a French phrase. A wallet may help users enter accented words, but accepting unaccented input is an interface feature rather than a universal BIP39 rule. Another wallet may reject the same input or handle it differently.

BIP39 specifies UTF-8 encoding with Unicode normalization form `NFKD` when deriving the seed. Under this normalization, a composed `é` becomes an `e` followed by a combining acute accent. A composed `è` becomes an `e` followed by a combining grave accent.

That process preserves the accent information. It does not turn an accented word into its unaccented spelling. Removing an accent changes the mnemonic text used in derivation unless the wallet first recognizes and corrects the entry.

After normalization, BIP39 derives a 64-byte seed using `PBKDF2-HMAC-SHA512` with `2048` iterations. The normalized mnemonic is the password input; the salt is `mnemonic` followed by the optional BIP39 passphrase, with the salt also normalized using `NFKD`. When no passphrase is used, the passphrase component is an empty string.

The language label is not a separate input to this calculation. However, wallet software uses word lists to recognize words, validate the checksum, and sometimes expand abbreviated input. Choosing the wrong list can therefore prevent correct restoration before derivation begins.

Keep the optional passphrase distinct from the mnemonic's language. Passphrase capitalization, spaces, and accents matter too, although Unicode representations that become identical under `NFKD` produce the same result. A passphrase that differs after normalization generally produces a different seed, without an inherent error message identifying it as a typo.

What to record and how to verify it

Write `BIP39 — French word list` beside the backup. This label is recovery metadata, not an extra mnemonic word. It gives a future user or recovery application an explicit starting point instead of requiring a guess from shared spellings.

1. Copy every word in its original order, including accents. Use numbered positions so line wrapping cannot obscure the sequence.
2. Record the language and standard explicitly. A note saying only “French” is less precise than `BIP39 — French word list`.
3. Record whether an additional BIP39 passphrase is required. Store that secret according to your backup plan; do not assume the language label describes it.
4. Use your wallet’s backup-check function, preferably on the hardware device itself. Confirm the complete phrase rather than checking only that individual words look familiar.
5. Before relying on another recovery application, confirm that it supports French BIP39 input. Support for English BIP39 alone does not establish that its entry interface accepts French. BIP39 recommends English for interoperability because many wallets support only English input.

Retain related recovery information when relevant, including the wallet’s derivation path and account type. Correct words and the correct passphrase can restore the underlying seed while an incompatible account-discovery process shows no funds. Language, passphrase, and derivation settings solve different recovery problems.

Avoid converting French words into English words at matching list positions as a backup shortcut. Although this preserves the encoded entropy and checksum of a valid mnemonic, it changes the mnemonic text. Because BIP39 derives the seed from that text, the resulting English mnemonic generally produces a different wallet.

FAQ

Can one shared word identify a phrase as French or English?

No. Exactly 100 spellings occur in both official lists. A shared word such as `abandon` gives no decisive language evidence by itself; use the recorded language and validate the complete phrase. A valid checksum alone does not prove that the intended phrase or wallet has been recovered.

Can I omit French accents when restoring?

Do not assume so. Some interfaces may resolve unaccented input to official words, but BIP39 normalization itself preserves accent information. Copy the original accents and follow the wallet’s documented input procedure.

Does writing “French” beside the phrase change the wallet?

No. The label helps someone select the correct word list. Keep it separate from the ordered mnemonic words and from any BIP39 passphrase.

Sources

- BIP39: Mnemonic code for generating deterministic keys (github.com)
- Official BIP39 French word list (github.com)
- Official BIP39 English word list (github.com)

Continue reading on bip39-phrase.com: How to Store a Seed Phrase: Paper, Steel and Safe Locations
More on this topic: Seed Phrases

Sample sequences of BIP39 words

Randomly generated sequences of words from the BIP39 English wordlist. None of them passes the BIP39 checksum, so no wallet will accept them: they show the format only. Never store funds with a phrase you found in a document.

Example 1

1 address	2 confirm	3 acid
4 orient	5 debris	6 idle
7 flight	8 page	9 section
10 clock	11 page	12 act

Example 2

1 end	2 wide	3 embody
4 provide	5 used	6 luxury
7 fever	8 minimum	9 media
10 crystal	11 throw	12 put

Example 3

1 solid	2 kangaroo	3 garlic
4 dinner	5 goose	6 shove
7 cancel	8 banana	9 cash
10 copper	11 relief	12 naive

Example 4

1 witness	2 cupboard	3 carpet
4 dinosaur	5 knock	6 treat
7 camp	8 polar	9 search
10 that	11 jeans	12 panic

Example 5		
1 paddle	2 marine	3 poet
4 stairs	5 fog	6 once
7 desk	8 door	9 hazard
10 blade	11 test	12 cushion

Example 6		
1 true	2 margin	3 update
4 lunar	5 cream	6 napkin
7 grab	8 shuffle	9 roof
10 barely	11 typical	12 sauce

Example 7		
1 gold	2 theory	3 volume
4 spatial	5 essence	6 volcano
7 sound	8 follow	9 water
10 sheriff	11 hockey	12 buddy

Example 8		
1 similar	2 sick	3 feature
4 senior	5 law	6 chimney
7 flower	8 unfair	9 actress
10 arctic	11 tip	12 sustain

Reading a BIP39 phrase

Every word stands for an 11-bit number: its position in the 2048-word list, counted from 0. Here is Example 1 decoded word by word. Each word links to its page on bip39-phrase.com, where the list is numbered from 1.

#	Word	Index (0-2047)	Word no.	11 bits
1	address	27	28	00000011011
2	confirm	375	376	00101110111
3	acid	15	16	00000001111
4	orient	1252	1253	10011100100
5	debris	451	452	00111000011
6	idle	901	902	01110000101
7	flight	711	712	01011000111
8	page	1271	1272	10011110111
9	section	1557	1558	11000010101

#	Word	Index (0-2047)	Word no.	11 bits
10	clock	347	348	00101011011
11	page	1271	1272	10011110111
12	act	19	20	00000010011

The 12 words carry 132 bits: 128 bits of entropy followed by a 4-bit checksum. The checksum must equal the first 4 bits of the SHA-256 hash of the entropy.

```
Entropy (hex): 0365dc07ce4386e1563cf7c2a56e7b81
```

This sequence ends in the checksum bits 0011, but SHA-256 of its entropy starts with 0101, so wallets reject it as an invalid phrase. That is the point of the checksum: about 15 of every 16 random or mistyped sequences fail it.

See also

- Leaving Off the Last BIP39 Word: A False Trick · January 8, 2025
- Diceware Lists and BIP39 Words: Different Jobs · October 30, 2026
- How to Stamp Seed Words into a Steel Plate · November 3, 2026

Educational document. The example sequences are random and fail the BIP39 checksum: they are not wallets and must never hold funds. Security notes: bip39-phrase.com/security/