Using the Subjunctive

Many students of French find that the subjunctive is very difficult to master, but hopefully this lesson will simplify matters for you. In Part I, we learned how to conjugate the present subjunctive of regular verbs. In Part II, we learned how to form the present subjunctive of irregular verbs. And finally in Part III, we will learn to use the subjunctive.

The subjunctive mood is used to express actions which are subjective: will/wanting, emotion, doubt, possibility, necessity, judgment. It is nearly always found in dependent clauses introduced by que or qui. The subjects of the dependent and main clauses are usually different. Remember that "that" is not always required in English.

Je veux que tu le fasses. I want you to do it.
Il faut que nous partions. It is necessary that we leave.

The subjunctive is used when the main clause expresses subjectivity, as with the following cases:

I. Verbs/expressions of will which express an order, a need, a piece of advice, or a want.

- aimer mieux que to like better / to prefer that
- commander que to order that
- demander que to ask (someone to do something)
- désirer que to desire that
- donner l'ordre que to order that
- empêcher que* to prevent (someone from doing something)
- éviter que* to avoid
- exiger que to demand that
- il est à souhaiter que it is to be hoped that
- il est essentiel que it is essential that
- il est important que it is important that
- il est naturel que it is natural that
- il est nécessaire que it is necessary that
- il est normal que it is normal that
- il est temps que it is time that
- il est urgent que it is urgent that
- il faut que it is necessary that
- il vaut mieux que it is better that
- interdire que to forbid that
- s'opposer que to oppose that
- ordonner que to order that
- permettre que to permit that
- préférer que to prefer that
- proposer que to propose that
- recommander que to recommend
- souhaiter que to wish that
- suggérer que to suggest that
- tenir à ce que to insist that
- vouloir que to want that

*these verbs are followed by the ne expléatif: Évitez qu'il ne parte - Prevent him from leaving.

II. Verbs/expressions of emotion or feeling which indicate fear, happiness, anger, regret, surprise, or other sentiments.

- adorer que to love that
- aimer que to like that
- apprécier que to appreciate that
- avoir honte que to be ashamed that
avoir peur que

to be afraid that

craindre que

to fear that

déplorer que

to deplore that

détester que

to hate that

être content que

to be happy that

être désolé que

to be sorry that

être étonné que

to be amazed that

être heureux que

to be happy that

être surpris que

to be surprised that

être triste que

to be sad that

il est bizarre que

it is odd that

il est bon que

it is good that

il est dommage que

it is too bad that

il est étonnant que

it is amazing that

il est étrange que

it is strange that

il est heureux que

it is fortunate that

il est honteux que

it is shameful that

il est inutile que

it is useless that

il est rare que

it is rare that

il est regrettable que

it is regrettable that

il est surprenant que

it is surprising that

il est utile que

it is useful that

regretter que

to regret that

se réjouir que

to be delighted that

III. Verbs/expressions of doubt, possibility, and opinion

accepter que

to accept

s'attendre à ce que

to expect

chercher ... qui

to look for

Je cherche un homme qui sache la vérité (he may not exist = doubt)

détesté que

to hate

douter que**

to doubt that

il est convenable que

it is proper/fitting that

il est douteux que***

it is doubtful that

il est faux que

it is false that

il est impossible que

it is impossible that

il est improbable que

it is improbable that

il est juste que

it is right/fair that

il est possible que

it is possible that

il est peu probable que

it is improbable that

il n'est pas certain que

it is not certain that

il n'est pas clair que

it is not clear that

il n'est pas évident que

it is not obvious that

il n'est pas exact que

it is not correct that

il n'est pas probable que

it is improbable that

il n'est pas sûr que

it is not certain that
il n'est pas vrai que
it is not true that
il semble que
it seems that
il se peut que
it may be that
le fait que
the fact that
nier que
to deny that
refuser que
to refuse

**These do not take the subjunctive when they are used negatively: Je doute qu'il vienne, Je ne doute pas qu'il vienne.

**Note:** The following verbs and expressions do not take the subjunctive when they are used in the affirmative, because they express facts which are considered certain. When negative or interrogatory, they require the subjunctive: Pensez-vous qu'il soit sympa ? Oui, je pense qu'il est sympa, Non, je ne pense pas qu'il soit sympa.

c'est que
it's that/because
connaître (quelqu'un) qui
to know (someone) that
croire que
to believe that
dire que
to say that
espérer que
to hope that
être certain que
to be certain that
être sûr que
to be sure that
il est certain que
it is certain that
il est clair que
it is clear/obvious that
il est évident que
it is obvious that
il est probable que
it is probable that
il est exact que
it is correct/true that
il est sûr que
it is certain that
il est vrai que
it is true that
il me (te, lui...) semble que
it seems to me (you, him...) that
il paraît que
it appears that
penser que
to think that
savoir que
to know that
trouver que
to find/think that
vouloir dire que
to mean that

IV. The following conjunctions:

à condition que
provided that
à moins que`
unless
afin que
so that
avant que`
before
bien que
although
de crainte que`
for fear that
de façon que
so that, in order that, in such a way that
de peur que`
for fear that
en attendant que
while, until
jusqu'à ce que
until
pour que
so that
pourvu que
provided that
quoique
even though
quoi que
sans que
*these conjunctions are followed by the ne explétif: Mangeons avant que nous ne partions - Let's eat before we leave

Note: The following conjunctions do not take the subjunctive, because they express facts which are considered certain:

ainsi que
alors que
après que***
aussitôt que***
car
en même temps que
deruis que
dès que***
lorsque***
parce que
pendant que
plutôt que
puisque
quand***
tandis que
une fois que***

***These conjunctions are followed by the future tense.

V.
In a subordinate clause with the negative pronoun ne ... personne or ne ... rien, or the indefinite pronoun quelqu'un or quelque chose.

Je ne connais personne qui veuille le faire.
I don't know anyone who wants to do it.

Y a-t-il quelqu'un qui puisse m'aider?
Is there someone who can help me?

VI.
After main clauses which contain the words seul, unique, premier, dernier, or any superlative, the subjunctive is optional - it depends on how concrete the speaker feels about what is being said.

C'est la seule personne que je connaisse.
That's the only person I know.

C'est l'étudiante la plus intelligente que j'aie.
She's the smartest student I have.

NOTE: There is no future subjunctive. Even if the action is to happen in the future, the present subjunctive is used. However, there is a past subjunctive.

The subjunctive can seem overwhelming, but the thing to remember is the subjunctive = subjective. That should help you figure it out at least 90% of the time.