

Using Productivity Software for Beginning Language Learning • Part II

Spreadsheets, Databases, & Mail Merge



This is the second article in a two-part series that demonstrates how productivity software can be used to motivate beginning middle school foreign-language students (or elementary-level foreign-language immersion students). The exercises in Part I featured in the May 1997 issue of L&L used word processing tools to increase language fluency, spelling, and agreement skills. The second article features language-learning exercises for the spreadsheet, database, and mail-merge functions of popular productivity software packages.

By Pam Lewis

When teaching or learning a second language, finding ways to practice verb conjugations in written form is always a challenge. Understanding how the conjugations are formed and having an awareness of any patterns in the conjugation help students memorize the written forms of verbs. Databases, mail-merge features, and spreadsheets can be applied in amazing ways to teach foreign language—especially in writing.

In the assignments featured in this article, students create a database of verb conjugations, a spreadsheet for conjugating verbs, and a database and word processing document that use the mail-merge feature to create documents that automatically generate the correct conjugation for the correct gender and number.

Although I used these assignments with seventh- and -eighth grade French students, they could be applied to teaching other languages. Immersion students could use these activities in upper elementary school, and adult or high school learners would also benefit from these exercises.

Using a Database to Record Verb Conjugations

In addition to more written practice with verbs, the process of entering the verbs into a database and then manipulating the records helps students concentrate on the patterns in the conjugations and focuses their attention on what is irregular about certain verbs. These activities are appropriate as soon as students have mastered pronunciation, meaning, and the use of pronouns through modeling, repetition, and question-and-answer exercises.

Students should first write out the verbs, paying careful attention to spelling for each conjugated form. In my precomputer years, I had students write out the verbs in columns, which helped them sort the verbs according to type and made them easier to memorize. Now we can take it a step further through the use of the database of verbs and their conjugations. For example, if you have already created your own database of verbs, it is easy to use it to generate homework assignments by copying and pasting the verbs from the database into a spreadsheet file and deleting certain words to make blanks that students can fill in.

Database Basics. To introduce the database activities, discuss with students the general uses of a database, such as for storing and organizing data in a phone book, dictionary, or the like. Ask students to suggest ways in which a database could be used for verbs.

Have students write out the conjugations of 10 verbs on flash cards. Next have them organize the cards in various ways: alphabetically, by verb type, and by endings for a certain pronoun. Help students develop their own explanations for why we group the verbs as we do (regular according to certain patterns and irregular because of some exception to

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the established pattern). Have students identify whether there are any patterns among the irregular verbs.

Creating the Database. Students then create a database file and enter the data as they conjugate the verbs. Students can use the instructions from the Verb Conjugation Exercise Using ClarisWorks Databases exercise shown on page 15. You can adapt most of the instructions to work with any other database program, such as Microsoft Works. The sample database shown in Figure 1 was created by a seventh-grade student taking French 1 shortly after the concept of verb conjugation was introduced. This student database consists mainly of verbs ending in -er and a few irregular verbs. Students in that class added new records to this verb database as they learned new conjugations over the course of the school year.

infinitif	en anglais	je	tu	elle	nous	vous	ils/elles
aller	to go	vais	vas	va	allons	allez	allent
avoir	to have	ai	as	a	avons	avez	ont
être	to be	suis	es	est	sommes	êtes	sont
faire	to do/make	fais	fais	fait	faisons	faites	font
aller	to go	vais	vas	va	allons	allez	allent
demander	to ask	demands	demands	demande	demandons	demandez	demandent
avoir	to have	ai	as	a	avons	avez	ont

Figure 1 shows a verb conjugation spreadsheet created by a first-year middle-school French student. It includes numerous regular verbs and a few irregular verbs.

Manipulating the Data. After the initial group of verbs is entered, students can manipulate the database in the same way they did the flash cards. I required my eighth-grade students to enter all the verbs they had learned so far. They worked at their own pace, and most of them completed the assignment within the time allotted, defining the fields and entering all their verbs in the database. Some students also had time to complete the follow-up questions on the worksheet, doing the record selections and explaining how verbs can be grouped according to patterns in their endings.

Using Spreadsheets to Conjugate Verbs

Spreadsheets are also powerful tools to use when reviewing verbs. The spreadsheet draws attention to how verbs are categorized and how the conjugation of regular verbs is generated. Once the spreadsheet is set up, all the user must do to enter a new regular verb is type in the infinitive and the stem and then use Fill Right to complete the automatic conjugation.

Spreadsheet Basics. Begin this lesson with a review of what a spreadsheet is and how it can be used to organize data in



categories. Explain how formulas can be used to do mathematical calculations on the spreadsheet. Have students brainstorm how this can be applied to studying verb conjugations.

Explain how the LEN, RIGHT, LEFT, and CONCAT functions work with text (if you are unfamiliar with these commands, consult the spreadsheet section of the manual for the software package you are using). Discuss how you could use these functions to determine the infinitive ending, stem, and conjugation. Have students discuss what other information they might need, such as the number of letters in the stem as well as the appropriate endings for each personal pronoun.

Creating the Spreadsheet. Students then create a spreadsheet using the worksheet entitled Verb Exercises Using Spreadsheets in ClarisWorks on page 16. Remind students that it is important to hit Tab or Enter before they move to another cell when entering a formula. To save time, you can provide your students with a spreadsheet template with the headings already entered.

Follow-Up Activities. Have students see if they can extend the spreadsheet to create the compound past tense (passé composé) for each of the verbs entered. They will need to add the ending for the stem that forms the past participle and devise a formula to form the past participle using CONCAT. Then they will need to add the personal pronoun and appropriate conjugation of avoir or être (j'ai, tu as, il a, etc.), plus a space. Next they must devise the formula to join the past participle to the appropriate conjugation.

Other tenses could be added in similar fashion as they are introduced in class. Irregular verbs might cause a problem; there may be two stems, or the verb may not follow any pattern at all. Students could be instructed to Fill Right for all verbs, including irregular verbs, and then go back and correct "mistakes" made by the computer.

Using Mail Merge to Conjugate Verbs Automatically

After students have learned word processing features and completed a database of verb conjugations, they are ready for this exercise. Begin by discussing the mail-merge feature and the kind of things it can be used for, such as form letters used by a school or bank.

Creating a Mail-Merge Document. Ask students to think of ways their verb databases could be used in a mail-merge document. Demonstrate to the class that if each verb was a new record and the fields were the subjects (first person singular, second person singular, etc.), we would get several copies of our description, each using different verbs. In order to have our mail-merge document conjugate different verbs, we would need to create a new database for each subject pronoun, with the field data being the conjugated form of each verb we wanted to use in the document. Have students complete the Descriptive Paragraph Using Mail Merge assignment on page 17. As soon as students have finished creating their documents, let them illustrate their descriptions using their own graphics or clip art. ■

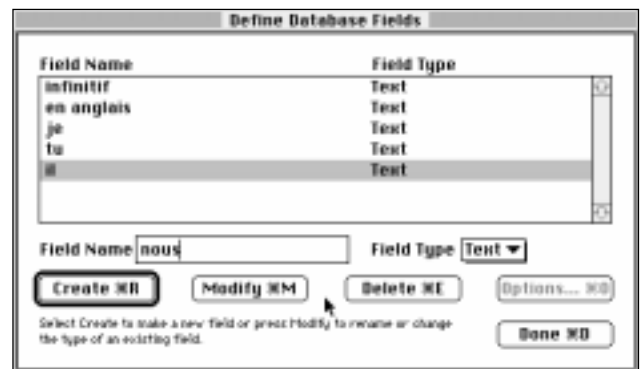
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Shareware Databases

The author has created shareware databases in French (Spanish and German to be completed soon) using ClarisWorks and Microsoft Works on both Macintosh and PC platforms. Teachers can use the databases to generate exercises or tests, they can use them in the computer lab with students and teach them how manipulate or add to the files, or they can use the verbs in a mail-merge document. In addition, she has included disk copies of all assignments mentioned in this article. For more information, contact the author at the e-mail address above.

Verb Conjugation Exercise Using ClarisWorks Databases

- Each student team should create a New database file entitled "Révision de Verbes" and enter the following field names into the Define Fields window (see illustration): infinitif, en anglais, je, tu, il/elle, nous, vous, ils/elles, futur proche (je), passé composé (il).
- Enter the following verbs as you conjugate them: aller, être, avoir, regarder, écouter, danser, donner, chanter, étudier, travailler, parler, manger, habiter, détester, adorer, arriver, rentrer, demander, tomber, acheter, manger, applaudir, rougir, dormir, servir, sortir, attendre, vendre, apprendre, comprendre (30 verbs total)
- Sort the verbs:
 - Into alphabetical order.
 - By their endings—er, ir, and irregular. To select certain records, such as verbs ending in "er," select Match Record and type in: right("infinitif",2)="er". This tells the sorting function to sort out infinitives whose last two letters equal "er."
- Change the layout of your document:
 - Under Layout, pull down New Layout. Click the button for Columnar Report.
 - Under File, pull down Page Setup. Change the orientation of the paper to landscape.
 - Under the Layout menu, select the Layout view. Adjust spacing of columns and formatting to produce a page that allows you to read all of the verbs and their conjugations easily.
 - Return to the Browse view by reselecting it in the Layout menu.
- Save and print one copy for each member of your group to use as a study guide.
- Answer the following questions:
 - How many "je" conjugations end in -s? What type of verbs are these?
 - What do the endings of all "tu" conjugations have in common?
 - How many "nous" conjugations end in -ons? Which "nous" conjugations end in -issons? Which "nous" conjugations do not end in -ons?
 - What do the "vous" conjugations (-ez or -es) have in common?
 - Which "ils/elles" conjugations end in -ont? What do the endings of all other "ils/elles" conjugations have in common?
- Complete this sentence: Grouping verbs makes it easier to learn their conjugations because ...



The Define Database Fields dialog box in ClarisWorks.



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Verb Exercises Using Spreadsheets in ClarisWorks

1. Create a spreadsheet entitled "Révision de Verbes" with the following headings in the first row: infinitif, regarder, parler, jouer, monter, montrer, attraper, finir, saisir, punir, and attendre so that it resembles row 1 on the sample spreadsheet shown.
2. In the first column under the cell with "infinitif," enter the following cell names: # of chars, type, stem 1, and stem 2 so that it resembles column A in the sample spreadsheet shown.
3. To count the number of letters in each verb and enter that number in row 2, paste in the function LEN(text) or type in LEN(B1). This counts the number of characters in that cell. Highlight the rest of the cells in the row after column B, and use the Fill Right Command to copy the formula into the rest of the cells in that row.
4. For the present-tense conjugations, skip the cell under "stem 2," and enter the following in each cell in column A: Present Tense, endings, je, tu, il/ elle/on, nous, vous, ils/ elles, then skip a cell and enter je, tu, il/elle/on, nous, vous, and ils/elles.
5. To determine the verb type (-er, -ir, or -re verb), enter the formula =RIGHT(B1,2) into cell B3 so that the spreadsheet will determine the last two letters at the end of the verb and enter it into the cell. Hit the Return key when you are finished creating the formula. Highlight the rest of the cells in the row after column B, and use the Fill Right command to copy the formula into the rest of the cells in that row. After you are done with the Fill Right command, all of the verb types should be listed in the proper cells.
6. To determine the stem of the verb, enter the formula =LEFT(B1,(B2-2)) as shown in the following illustration. Hit Return, and select the rest of the cells in that row. Use Fill Right to copy the formula into the rest of the row. When you are done, your spreadsheet should have each verb stem listed.
7. Enter the appropriate verb endings for the present tense in B9–B14. Copy and paste for other verbs of the same type. Do the same for the -ir and -re verbs.
8. To begin filling in the conjugations for the first verb (B16–B21), enter the formula =CONCAT(B4, B9) in B16 to form the conjugation for "je," first person singular. B4 (the stem) and B9 (the ending) are joined together. For cells B17–B21, B4 remains in the formula as the stem, but cell B9 needs to change to whatever cell contains the corresponding ending (B10–B14) for that particular subject ("tu", il/elle/on, etc.).
9. Use Fill Right to copy each formula across the row for each personal pronoun ("je", "tu", etc.). When you are finished, you should see each verb conjugated across the spreadsheet as shown here:

	A	B	C	D
1	infinitif	regarder	parler	jouer
2	# of chars	8	6	5
3	type	er	er	er
4	stem1	regard	parl	jou
5	stem2			
6				
7	Present Tense			
8	Endings			
9	je	e	e	e
10	tu	es	es	es
11	il/elle/on	e	e	e
12	nous	ons	ons	ons
13	vous	ez	ez	ez
14	ils/elles	ent	ent	ent
15				
16	je	regarde	parle	joue
17	tu	regardes	parles	joues
18	il/elle/on	regarde	parle	joue
19	nous	regardons	parlons	jouons
20	vous	regardez	parlez	jouez
21	ils/elles	regardent	parlent	jouent
22				

After entering the formula to combine the verb stem with the proper verb ending for each person/gender, use the Fill Right command to conjugate all the verbs in the remainder of the database.

10. Voilà! You have conjugated 10 regular verbs of three different types. Format the text and column and row sizes as you wish, and print your spreadsheet to keep as a study aid.

	A	B	C	D
1	infinitif	regarder	parler	jouer
2	# of chars	8	6	5
3	type	er	er	er
4	stem1	regard	parl	jou
5	stem2			

The LEFT(B1,(B2-2)) formula drops the final two letters of the infinitive to calculate the stem of the verb.



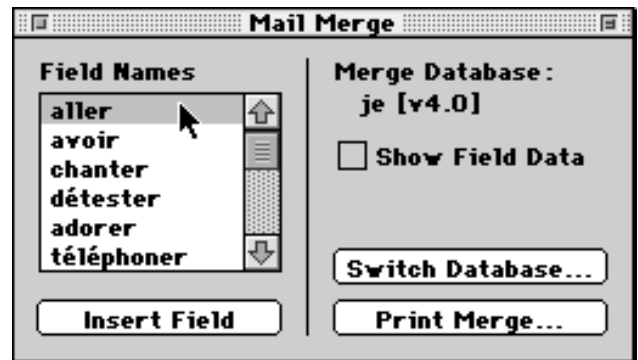
Creating a Descriptive Paragraph Using Mail Merge in ClarisWorks 4.0

1. What can mail merge be used for?
2. What documents must be open to be able to do a mail merge?

Here are the steps for conjugating verbs in the first- and third-person singular and inserting them into a descriptive paragraph:

1. Open a new database document.
 - When the Define Database Field window appears, enter the names of all the infinitives you plan to use in your paragraph as separate field names. The following verbs may be included:
 - s'appeler
 - avoir (ans)
 - habiter
 - aller
 - manger
 - faire
 - adorer
 - parler
 - être
 - passer
 - porter
 - aimer
 - regarder
 - Save the database as "Verb database—je".
 - Under the Format menu, select Insert Header. Enter the name "Verb database—je" as your header, along with the name of your group and the date.
 - Under the View pull-down menu, select Tile Windows.
 - Pull down the Layout menu and select Browse. Enter the correct form of each of those verbs for je (first-person singular). You may choose to copy and paste this information from the spreadsheet you have already completed. Save the database.
2. Open a new Word Processing document.
 - Save it as "Moi."
 - Write two paragraphs in French describing yourself. Give information about your age, your personality, where you live, the school you go to, what you like to do, what you do after school or on weekends, and the languages you speak. Use at least five of the verbs from your database. Do not conjugate any verbs you use in this rough draft; instead mark the place where you will later insert the correct form of the verb by entering the infinitive form in bold face.
 - Save.

3. With both the database and word processing documents open, go to the View menu and select Tile Windows. You should be able to see both the word processing document and the database. Highlight the first infinitive you need to replace with a conjugated verb. Select the Mail Merge function under the file menu and the following dialog box will appear.



The Mail Merge Dialog box in ClarisWorks.

In the Field Name column, select the verb you want to conjugate, click on it, and click on Insert Field. It will place the infinitive in angle brackets in your document, so that it looks like the following:

Je <<s'appeler>> Dana.

4. Continue using the mail-merge function to insert the verbs you need until your description is complete. Click on Print Merge in the Mail Merge dialog box. You will then see the standard print menu. Make whatever adjustments are necessary to the print information and then click on Print.

Note: You may not use different forms of the verb (tu, il/elle, nous, vous, ils/elles) with the mail-merge function in this document. If you use a different subject with a verb, you must conjugate that verb yourself.

5. Now do a description of your mother or a female friend. Repeat the steps above, except this time create and open an "elle verbs" database. You can easily adapt the "je verbs" database and then save it as "elle verbs" if you wish. Create a mail-merge document similar to the one you have already created. Print this document with all the correct forms of the verbs for third-person singular by clicking on Print Merge.