Understanding French Subjunctive

French subjunctive is a bit tough to understand. But it is usually poorly explained. This blog post will definitely help you...

1. The first thing is to memorize the verb forms
Drilling is the only solution. Concentrate on the most common verb: aller, être, avoir, prendre... This is pure memorization, it has nothing to do with understanding, so I won’t talk about it here.

2. The only conjunction that can be followed by the subjunctive is “que” or “qui”
Other conjunctions like “quand” and “si” don’t use the subjunctive. So you only have to worry about using the subjunctive when you are about to say a sentence using “que” (most cases) or “qui” (Ok... now that I said this, I ran into some exceptions... “le seul endroit où je ne sois jamais allé” for example... but the large majority of subjunctive cases are going to be with “que” – sometimes “qui”).

3. The subjunctive only happens when several people are involved (and with impersonal constructions like “il faut”)
- Je veux que tu ailles au supermarché. (me wanting you to go = 2 people = subjunctive)
- Je veux aller au supermarché. (me wanting me to go = only me involved = infinitive)
- Il faut manger pour vivre (true for everybody = infinitive)
- Il faut que tu manges des légumes (this condition applies only to you = subjunctive)
- Je suis contente que tu ailles mieux. (me being happy that you are better = 2 people – subjunctive)
- Je suis contente d’aller mieux. (me being happy that I am better = indicative)

So, if the same person is doing both actions, we use an infinitive construction.

4. You don’t have to worry about the interrogative form of the subjunctive
... because there isn’t any! You can use a subjunctive clause in a question, for example « Voulez-vous que je vienne avec vous? », but there is no way to turn a subjunctive clause itself into a question.

Now that the ground rules are established, let’s try to understand the subjunctive. What follows works most of the time, I’m sure you’ll find exceptions, but I hope it helps making most cases clearer.
5. The subjunctive states 2 things:

one person influencing/having feeling for a DIFFERENT person’s action.

- **Je veux que tu fasses la vaisselle.** I = first person, want = verb of influence, you = different person, do the dishes = the action the first person is trying to influence.

- **Je suis contente que tu fasses la vaisselle.** I = first person, am happy = feeling, you = different person, do the dishes = the action the first person has a feeling about.

the percentage of chance FOR THE SPEAKER of this wish/fear/order/… becoming a reality.

- **Je constate qu’il est là.** Actually, I can see him, FOR ME, this is a 100% sure thing = indicative. The actual reality is that he is an holographic projection… but the truth lies in the eyes of the beholder…

- **J’aimerais qu’il soit là.** But I know his plane is stuck in NY. Probability of my wish becoming a reality is almost 0 = subjunctive.

So, where do you draw the line? I’d say if you know for sure it’s the reality = indicative.

- Over 70% chance of the action becoming a reality = indicative.

- If there is under 70% chance of the action becoming a reality = subjunctive.

- **Il est certain qu’il sera là demain** = 100% chance of becoming a reality = indicative

- **Il est probable qu’il sera là demain** = 70% chance of becoming a reality = indicative

- **Il est possible qu’il soit là demain** = 50% chance of becoming a reality = subjunctive

- **Regarde! Une maison qui a un grand jardin et une piscine.** I am actually looking at this house. 100% chance of the house existing = indicative.

- **Je cherche une maison qui ait un grand jardin et une piscine.** I am at a realtor’s place and describing my dream house. He might or might not have one, I am not sure it exists – for my budget that is :-) = subjunctive

- **Je crois qu’il va partir.** I’m positive about it. Say 90% he’s going to leave = indicative.

- **Je désire qu’il parte.** But he really wants to stay… so there is only a 2% chance he is going to leave = subjunctive.

- **J’exige que tu ailles à l’école.** OK, but you have no intention of going. So even if I want it, it’s not the reality, and I know it… = little chance of becoming a reality = subjunctive

- **Je crains qu’elle ne mente.** That is my fear. But I’m not sure about it = little chance of becoming a reality = subjunctive. (Note the “ne” here has no negative value. It’s a rather formal concept, called “le ne explétif” and it comes with verbs of fear and some expressions. The use of the “ne explétif” is not compulsory, it’s almost never used in speaking, and has no meaning whatsoever: it’s only there to be pretty – and confuse students of French!)
Here it helps to understand that French people take their beliefs for a reality (LOL). Verbs like croire que, penser que, supposer que, imaginer que, espérer que are followed by the indicative. But souhaiter que is followed by the subjunctive… Honestly, I think it’s stupid, and makes no sense. Maybe it’s an evolution of the language…

6 – In the Negative
All these verbs introduce the subjunctive in the negative, since now the percentage of chance of the action becoming a reality is very low:

- Je pense qu’il reviendra = his coming, to me, has a 90% chance of becoming a reality = indicative
- Je ne pense pas qu’il revienne = his coming, to me, has a 5% of becoming a reality = subjunctive

Watch out: “I don’t think he will come” is not the same thing as “I think he will not come”…. You have to keep the action you are talking about very clear, and make sure you are applying the negative the the correct part of the sentence and not changing your sentence altogether.

Now, all this being said, another method is to learn by heart…. And it may work better :-) Here is a list of common verbs and conjunctions followed by indicative or subjunctive:

Indicative:
- constater, observer, remarquer, savoir, trouver, croire, penser, supposer, imaginer, affirmer, déclarer, dire, espérer + que + indicatif.
- il est clair que, il est certain que, il est sûr que, il est probable que + indicatif
- après que + indicatif – although many French people use the subjunctive – myself included… It’s a mistake but the indicative sounds really weird there…

Subjunctive:
- wish = souhaiter, désirer, suggérer, proposer, conseiller + que + subjunctive
- likes = aimer, préférer, détester, adorer + que + subjunctive
- fear = avoir peur, craindre, redouter + que + subjunctive
- regrets = regretter, être désolé + que + subjunctive
- doubt = douter + que + subjunctive
- order = vouloir, ordonner, exiger, permettre, refuser, supplier + que + subjunctive
- il faut, il vaut mieux, il est important, il est dommage + que + subjunctive
- Pour, afin, de sorte, de crainte, de peur, avant, en attendant, jusqu’à ce, bien, à moins, à condition, pourvu + que + subjunctive
- avant que + subjunctive (and après que + indicative as stated over)