

# Look, see or watch ?

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These three verbs can be difficult to differentiate, here are their nuances:

## LOOK

Look implies that you look at something deliberately. It requires an effort on the part of the subject:

- Don't **look** at me like that...
- **Look!** It's snowing!
- **Look** at me while I am talking to you.

⚠ When look has an object, it is followed by the preposition "at":

- Look at the board. ✓
- Look the board. ✗

⚠ When there is no object, there's no need for a preposition:

- Look here. ✓
- Look at here. ✗

When the thing seen is the subject of the sentence, "look" refers to an appearance, an external perception. It then translates the idea of appearing (we can also use the verb 'seem' instead sometimes):

- You **look** pale.
- Do I **look** OK?
- She's 60, but she doesn't **look** it.

Look is the basis of many constructions such as *look like* :

- It **looks like** it's going to rain.
- It **looks like** they are leaving.

⚠ Look is also the basis of many phrasal verbs:

- **look after**
- **look away**
- **look for**
- **look into**
- **look out**
- **look through**
- **look up**
- **look up to**

## SEE

We use see when something passes through the subject's field of vision unintentionally, as soon as we open our eyes and without necessarily paying attention:

- I **saw** him at the party yesterday.
- Did you **see** that bird?
- I can't **see** without my glasses.

- Bats can **see** very well in the dark.

⚠ Be careful, the progressive form of see is not usually used with a name:

- I can see an elephant. ✓
- I am seeing an elephant. ✗

See is sometimes used with 'if':

- Let's **see** if there is any food left.

We use *see* in the expression "See you tomorrow!"

⚠ See is also used in several phrasal verbs:

- **see about** → Paul likes photography, I'll see about buying him a camera for his birthday.
- **see out** → Thank you very much for coming here. Mrs. Smith will see you out.
- **see through** → When Pete was depressed, all his friends saw him through.
- **see in** → The receptionist sees in our visitors.
- **see off** → We all came to see Donald off and wish him the best of luck.
- **see over** → She said she'd like to see over the house.
- **see to** → Don't worry, I will see to the leak in the piping.

## WATCH

Watch implies that you are much more active, you focus your attention on something that is moving on a screen or changing for a specific amount of time (a sunset, sports...). It has more or less the same meaning as *look*.

- We **watched** the sunrise.
- Don't spend too much time **watching** TV.
- I like **watching** soccer on TV.

⚠ Instead, we use *see* and not *watch* when we talk about a match or a public performance, such as a play, a concert or a movie in the cinema:

- We **saw** an interesting movie at the cinema last night.

On the other hand, if we watch a movie at home, we will use *watch* instead:

- I **watched** 'Phantom of the Opera' last night on TV. (signifie que l'on était à la maison)
- I **saw** 'Phantom of the Opera' last night. (signifie que l'on était au cinéma ou au théâtre).

⚠ Watch can also be translated as 'to be careful about something or someone'.

- Can you **watch** my bag for a moment?
- **Watch** him. I am certain he is up to something.
- **Watch** your step

We sometimes use the particule 'out' :

- **Watch** out !
- **Watch** out for cars when you cross the road.