



CULTURE COURSE

French Literature

10 Chapters

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Generated with Claude

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French Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Why French Literature? Scope & Sources

There is a famous line attributed to the French queen Marie Antoinette: when told that the people had no bread, she is supposed to have replied, "Let them eat cake." It is quoted constantly, and almost certainly she never said it. The sentence appears in a book written by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, about a "great princess" he does not name, at a time when Marie Antoinette was a child (check the details). That makes it a good place to begin a course on French literature: a country whose writers invent, preserve and sometimes ruin its own history. This opening chapter explains why the subject deserves a course, sets out what the course covers, and shows how to read the sources. A great deal of literary history is half legend, so the chapter marks what is firm and what is not.

Why French Literature?

Literature holds an unusual place in French public life. Novelists and poets are treated as public figures whose opinions matter. A national literary prize season each autumn, the *rentrée littéraire*, is covered in the news like a sporting event (check the details). Students at secondary school study set texts and write formal essays about them, and quotations from authors are part of the shared language of educated French people. A series of French writers also took part directly in public arguments: Voltaire in the eighteenth century, Hugo in the nineteenth, Zola in the Dreyfus affair, Sartre and Camus after the Second World War (Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 9).

The question for the whole course

Is French literature a set of masterpieces, a national institution or a long argument about what a writer is for? The honest answer is that it is all three, and the chapters follow how they mix: the medieval poets and the classical dramatists, the philosophers who changed politics, the novelists who invented new ways of describing society, and the poets who broke the rules. The capstone in Chapter 10 returns to this question and follows one thread, the writer as public conscience, from Voltaire to the present.

The Académie Française and the Language

The Académie française was founded in 1635 under Cardinal Richelieu, the chief minister of Louis XIII, to regulate the French language (check the date and the circumstances). It has forty members, often called the "immortals", chosen by the existing members, and it has published a dictionary of the language over several editions. It is still active today, and still argues about which words and spellings are acceptable. Its authority is advisory and not legal, and it is frequently criticised as conservative, but it shows how seriously the French state has taken the language. That attitude connects directly to the policies discussed at the end of another course, French Music 10.

A One-Paragraph Version

French literature begins in the Middle Ages with epic poems such as the *Chanson de Roland* and the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, alongside the songs of the troubadours (see French Music 2). The Renaissance brought Rabelais, Montaigne and the poets of the Pléiade. In the seventeenth century, under Louis XIV, classical theatre flourished with Corneille, Racine and Molière. The eighteenth century belonged to the philosophers of the Enlightenment. The nineteenth saw Romanticism, then Realism and Naturalism, and a series of great novels; late in that century poetry was transformed by Baudelaire, Rimbaud and their successors. The twentieth century brought Proust, existentialism and the experimental Nouveau Roman, and today French-language writing is as international as it is national. Each of these is developed in a later chapter.

What the Course Covers

Chapters	Theme
2–3	Medieval voices; the Renaissance
4–5	Classical theatre; the Enlightenment
6–7	Romanticism and the great novel; Realism and Naturalism
8–9	Poetry from Baudelaire to Surrealism; Proust, existentialism and after
10	The writer as public conscience

What the course leaves out

This is a cultural history, not a complete reading list. It does not rank authors, summarise every plot or require you to have read the books. Works are described only as far as the history needs, and long quotations are avoided. A sibling course, French Film & Television, takes the same approach to the screen.

Scope: France at the Centre

The course is built around France. French-language literature is bigger than France: Belgium, Switzerland, Quebec, the Caribbean and many African countries have literatures of their own, and many writers worked across borders. Francophone authors from outside France appear mainly in Chapter 10, where they are named and placed. A full study of Francophone literature would be a separate course.

Record, Legend and Memory

The cake story shows why this distinction matters. Three kinds of claim need different handling.

Record

Dates of publication, trials, prizes and appointments, found in first editions, archives and reliable reference works.

Legend

Quotations and anecdotes repeated so often that they feel like facts: the cake line, the writer who died in poverty, a famous sentence "he said". Another example is a line often attributed to Voltaire about defending to the death someone's right to speak, which was written by a later biographer as a summary of his views (check the details).

Memory

What readers recall of a book from school. Good for mood, unreliable for the plot, the date or even the author.

A note on accuracy

Dates, titles and names in this course are given from general knowledge and checked as each chapter is written. Where a point is uncertain the text says so. Before quoting a line, a date or a prize elsewhere, check it against a scholarly edition or a reliable reference work. The same habit runs through the sibling courses.

Which Translations to Read

- **Read in translation first.** You do not need French to follow this course, and every major work discussed is available in English.
- **Choose a recent translation of a novel.** Translations age, and a more recent one is often smoother and more accurate, though some older ones are classics in their own right (check the editions available).
- **Look for a dual-language edition of poetry.** Poetry loses most in translation, so editions with the French and English on facing pages are the best choice.
- **Use series with notes.** Well-known paperback series offer introductions, notes and chronologies, which help a first-time reader.
- **Compare two translations of a passage.** It is the quickest way to see how much a translator decides.

Where to Read and Look

- **The national library.** The Bibliothèque nationale de France offers a large digital library called Gallica, with scanned books and manuscripts (check what is available).
- **Free texts.** Many older French works exist in free online editions, in the original and in older translations.
- **Libraries and bookshops.** Local libraries usually hold the main translations.
- **Literary museums and houses.** Several authors' homes are open to visitors in France, such as the house of Victor Hugo in Paris (check the details).

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

In three sentences, explain why French literature can count as a window on French culture. Use at least two points from this chapter.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Sort these into record, legend or memory: (a) the Académie française was founded in 1635; (b) Marie Antoinette told the poor to eat cake; (c) your recollection of a French book you read at school.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose a famous quotation you believe comes from a French writer. Write down who said it, when and in which work, then check each against a reliable source and note any corrections.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Why it matters:** writers as public figures; a literary prize season; the study of set texts
- **Académie française:** founded in 1635; forty members; a dictionary; advisory authority
- **Course shape:** medieval to the Enlightenment, the nineteenth-century novel, poetry, the twentieth century, and a capstone
- **Scope:** France-centred; Francophone voices mainly in Chapter 10
- **The cake line:** a legend; the sentence is older than Marie Antoinette's time in France
- **Handling sources:** separate record, legend and memory
- **Translations:** recent for novels, dual-language for poetry

Next chapter: Medieval Voices, which looks at the *Chanson de Roland*, courtly love and the first French poets.

French Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Medieval Voices

French literature begins with a poem about a battle that did not happen the way the poem says. Over the next four centuries, writers in what became France composed war epics, tales of knights and ladies, satirical stories, allegories of love and, at the end, the verse of a criminal poet who may have escaped the gallows by a whisker. This chapter surveys those medieval voices. The evidence is thin: manuscripts are few, dates are approximate, and many authors are known only by a name or a guess. Names, dates and attributions are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Before French Literature

The French language grew out of the Latin spoken in Roman Gaul, changed by centuries of local speech and by the Frankish rulers (check the details). The earliest surviving text in an early form of French is usually said to be the Oaths of Strasbourg, a political agreement of 842 recorded in an early Romance language alongside a Germanic one (check). Literature in the language followed in the following centuries. Scholars call the language of this period Old French, and it is different enough from modern French that a modern reader needs a translation.

The Chanson de Roland

The *Chanson de Roland* (Song of Roland) is the best-known of the epic poems called *chansons de geste*, "songs of deeds". It is usually dated to around the year 1100 and survives in several manuscripts, of which the oldest and best known is kept in Oxford (check the details). It tells how Roland, a nephew of the emperor Charlemagne, commands the rearguard of the army, is betrayed and is killed with his companions at a mountain pass in the Pyrenees, refusing for too long to blow his horn for help.

History and the poem

The poem is loosely based on an event of 778, when the rearguard of Charlemagne's army was attacked in the Pyrenees. Chroniclers of the time and later sources suggest that the attackers were local Basques, not the Muslim armies shown in the poem (check the details). The poem turned a small ambush into a story of Christian heroism and treason,

and in that form it served as a founding story for later generations. It is a reminder that the story told about an event can matter more than the event.

The poem's last lines name a "Tuold", whose role, as author, copyist or reciter, has been debated for generations (check). The identity of the author is unknown.

Courtly Romance

Chrétien de Troyes

A poet writing in the second half of the twelfth century (check the dates) who gave the stories of King Arthur's knights their French form. His works include *Erec et Enide*, a tale of Lancelot and an unfinished tale of Perceval, which introduces the Grail (check the titles and the order).

Courtly love

A literary idea in which a knight serves and adores a lady, often one he cannot have. The modern phrase "courtly love" is a nineteenth-century scholarly label, and how far it describes real behaviour is debated (check).

Marie de France

A woman poet of the twelfth century, known for short narrative poems called *lais*. Almost nothing is known about her life beyond her name (check).

Troubadours and trouvères

The lyric poets of the south and north whose songs shaped the language of love. Their music is discussed in French Music 2.

The Late Middle Ages

Work or writer	Kind	Note
<i>Roman de la Rose</i>	Allegorical love poem	Begun by Guillaume de Lorris and continued decades later by Jean de Meun; among the most copied works of its time (check the dates and the authors' roles)
<i>Roman de Renart</i>	Animal tales	Stories about a trickster fox that mock the powerful; so popular that "renard" replaced the older word for fox in

Work or writer	Kind	Note
		French (check)
Fabliaux	Short comic tales	Often bawdy stories about tricksters and fools (check)
Christine de Pizan (about 1364 to about 1430)	Poet and prose writer	Born in Venice and raised in France; often described as one of the first women to earn a living by writing; her <i>Book of the City of Ladies</i> defends women (check the details)
François Villon (born 1431)	Poet	Parisian poet and criminal; his <i>Testament</i> mixes humour, fear of death and street slang (check)

Villon

François Villon was born in Paris in 1431 and studied at the university, but he was involved in violence and theft and had to flee the city more than once (check the details). He was condemned to be hanged at one point, and his sentence was reduced to banishment, after which nothing certain is known of him (check). His verse is famous for the line asking where the snows of last year have gone, a refrain about the passing of time and of beauty, and for a ballad written as if from the mouths of hanged men (check the titles). Much of his reputation rests on the combination of a very personal voice and a deep awareness of death, and he is often described as the first modern French poet.

Medieval authors are shadows

For much of this chapter the author is only a name, and sometimes not even that. When a medieval text is "by" someone, the statement usually means "attributed to", and the text may have been altered by copyists. Read the introductions to editions, which explain what is known and what is guessed.

Check the details

Dates of medieval texts are rough, and the lives of their authors are often reconstructed from a few documents. The historical background of the Roland story, the identity of

Tuold and the terms "courtly love" and "first modern poet" are all worth checking in a good reference work before they are repeated.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Summarise the story of the Chanson de Roland in three sentences and explain how it differs from the historical event it is based on.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain what is meant by courtly love and why historians are cautious about the phrase.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose Villon or Christine de Pizan and describe, in four sentences, what makes the writer distinctive and what in the account of their life needs checking.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Earliest text:** the Oaths of Strasbourg (842), usually cited
- **Roland:** chanson de geste of about 1100; based on an ambush of 778
- **Chrétien de Troyes:** Arthurian romances; Lancelot and the Grail
- **Courtly love:** a scholarly label for a literary idea
- **Marie de France:** twelfth-century woman poet; the *lais*
- **Late Middle Ages:** Roman de la Rose, Roman de Renart, fabliaux

- **Christine de Pizan:** writer who defended women
- **Villon:** criminal poet; the Testament

Next chapter: The Renaissance, which covers Rabelais, Montaigne and the poets of the Pléiade.

French Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · The Renaissance

In the sixteenth century French writers rediscovered the ancient world, made use of a new technology, the printing press, and began to argue that their own language was good enough for poetry, philosophy and law. The century produced a giant comic novelist, a thinker who invented a new kind of writing about himself, and a group of poets who wanted French to rival Latin. It was also a century of religious war. This chapter follows the French Renaissance through its main voices. Names, dates and attributions are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Print, Learning and the Vernacular

Printing reached France in the late fifteenth century, and cities such as Paris and Lyon became centres of the book trade (check the details). Cheaper books spread the learning of ancient Greece and Rome, which scholars called the "new learning", and spread debates about religion as well. At the same time the French language gained status. A royal ordinance of 1539, often cited, required legal documents to be written in French instead of Latin (check the date and the wording). The question of whether the vernacular could carry serious writing was one the century answered by doing it.

François Rabelais

François Rabelais (born around 1483 to 1494, died 1553, check the dates) was a former monk who became a physician and a writer. His comic books about the giants Pantagruel and Gargantua, first published in the 1530s (check the dates), mix scholarship, obscenity, satire and invention on a vast scale. They mock pedants, the clergy and wars, and describe a utopian abbey, Thélème, whose motto is usually translated as "do what you will" (check). The books were condemned by the theology faculty of the Sorbonne, and the author had to be careful (check the details). The word "Rabelaisian" in English still means exuberant, earthy and satirical.

Laughter as argument

Rabelais is funny, but the jokes carry an argument: that education should be broad and humane, that rulers should be restrained and that people should be free to follow their

natures. This mixture of humour and serious thought recurs in French writing, notably in Voltaire (Chapter 5). A reader who skips the humour misses the argument.

Michel de Montaigne

Michel de Montaigne (1533 to 1592) was a nobleman from near Bordeaux who retired from public life around 1570 to read and write in a tower of his château (check the details). The result was the *Essais* (Essays), a long and growing collection of short prose pieces first published in 1580 and later expanded (check). He is often described as the inventor of the essay as a literary form, in which a writer explores a subject, and himself, by thinking aloud. His motto, usually given as "What do I know?", sums up a sceptical, tolerant temperament (check). His friendship with the writer Étienne de La Boétie, who died young, is a recurring theme (check).

Writing about oneself

Montaigne said he was himself the subject of his book, which was a new idea at the time.

Scepticism

He doubted that human beings could be certain of much and urged tolerance, a stance shaped by the religious wars.

Quotation and wandering

The *Essais* are full of quotations from ancient authors, and wander from topic to topic in a way that feels conversational.

Lasting influence

Writers from Shakespeare's time to the present have drawn on him (check the details).

The Pléiade

A group of poets in the mid-sixteenth century, later called the Pléiade, set out to enrich French poetry by imitating the ancients and the Italians. Their manifesto, a work by Joachim du Bellay published in 1549, argued that French was a language worthy of great poetry and should be "defended and illustrated" (check the title and the date). Two names dominate.

Poet	Known for	Note
Pierre de Ronsard (1524 to 1585)	Odes, love sonnets and a famous short poem urging a young woman to gather the roses of her youth	Called the "prince of poets" in his lifetime (check)
Joachim du Bellay (about 1522 to 1560)	The <i>Regrets</i> , sonnets written during a stay in Rome	Homesick, ironic poems that contrast Rome with his native Anjou (check)

Women Writers of the Century

Several women wrote at the highest level. Marguerite de Navarre, sister of King Francis I, was the author of the *Heptaméron*, a collection of tales told by a group of travellers, published after her death (check). In Lyon, Louise Labé published love poems in the 1550s that are still admired for their frankness (check). Their presence shows that the Renaissance was more open to women writers than it is sometimes said to be, though they remained exceptions.

Religious War

The century was shadowed by the Wars of Religion between Catholics and Protestants, which began in the 1560s and lasted decades (check). Atrocities such as the massacre of Protestants in Paris in 1572, known as the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, left a deep mark on writers (check). Montaigne's tolerance and the satire of Rabelais are partly responses to a world in which religious difference was lethal.

Check the details

Birth years of Rabelais and the order of publication of his books are debated. Dates of the *Essais*' editions and of the Pléiade's manifestos are often repeated with small errors. Confirm them in a scholarly edition or reference work before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain how printing and the status of the French language changed in the sixteenth century, and give one example of each.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Compare Rabelais and Montaigne in four sentences: what each wrote, what tone each used and what each believed about human beings.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Describe the aim of the Pléiade and name two of its poets, saying what each wrote about.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Print and language:** Paris and Lyon as book centres; French required for legal documents in 1539
- **Rabelais:** Pantagruel and Gargantua; comic, satirical, learned
- **Montaigne:** the Essais; sceptical, tolerant, self-examining
- **Pléiade:** Ronsard and Du Bellay; poetry in French to rival the ancients
- **Women writers:** Marguerite de Navarre, Louise Labé
- **Background:** the Wars of Religion
- **Check:** birth years, editions, manifesto dates

Next chapter: The Grand Siècle: Classical Theatre, which covers Corneille, Racine, Molière and La Fontaine.

French Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Classical Theatre

The seventeenth century is called the Grand Siècle, the Great Century, and its writers wrote for a king who wanted his court to be the centre of Europe. The same Louis XIV who used music as an instrument of power (see French Music 2) also made the theatre part of the machinery of the state. Out of this partnership came three dramatists whose plays are still performed daily in France: Corneille, Racine and Molière. This chapter looks at the rules they worked under, the quarrels they provoked and the poet who turned animal stories into one of the most quoted books in the language. Names, dates and attributions are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

The Rules

French classical drama followed a set of rules, taken partly from ancient writers and partly from the critics of the time, that governed what a proper play looked like. Writers and critics argued about them heatedly, and the argument itself shaped the plays.

The three unities

A play should have one action, take place in one location and cover no more than a day (check the details). The aim was a tight, concentrated drama.

Propriety

Characters and events should be fitting for the stage: violence took place offstage and was reported, and language was kept elevated in tragedy (check).

Verisimilitude

The action had to seem believable, even if it was not strictly true to history.

The alexandrine

Serious plays were written in rhymed twelve-syllable lines, the alexandrine, which gave French drama its stately sound.

Corneille and the Quarrel of Le Cid

Pierre Corneille (1606 to 1684) is usually seen as the first great French tragic dramatist (check the dates). His play *Le Cid*, first performed in 1637, tells of a young nobleman forced to choose between love and family honour, and it was a huge popular success (check). It was also attacked by critics for breaking the rules, and the newly founded Académie française was asked to judge the dispute, which produced a long public controversy (check the details). The episode shows how seriously the French took the rules, and how far the state, through the Académie, was involved in literary taste.

Racine

Jean Racine (1639 to 1699) is usually regarded as the master of French classical tragedy (check the dates). His plays, such as *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*, are written in polished alexandrines and focus on the inner struggle of characters overwhelmed by passion (check the dates). The action is often reduced to a few people in a room, talking, and the effect comes from the intensity of the language. Racine was educated by religious scholars with a severe moral outlook, and the tension between passion and guilt in his plays is often linked to that background (check). After *Phèdre* in 1677 he largely stopped writing for the theatre and took a post at the court (check).

The Corneille and Racine rivalry

Critics and audiences of the time argued about which was better, and the argument has never quite ended. A common summary is that Corneille showed people as they should be, strong-willed heroes, and Racine showed them as they are, driven by passion. Like most summaries, it simplifies, but it gives a first way into the difference (check the description).

Molière

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (1622 to 1673), who wrote under the stage name Molière, was an actor, theatre manager and playwright, and is the great comic writer of the French stage (check). His plays mock hypocrites, misers, social climbers and pedants, and they are still performed constantly. A few examples are listed here.

Play	Target	Note
<i>Tartuffe</i>	Religious hypocrisy	First performed in 1664 and banned for several years after complaints from powerful religious figures; allowed again later (check the dates)
<i>Le Misanthrope</i>	A man who cannot stand social insincerity	A comedy with a serious edge (check)
<i>L'Avare</i>	A miser	A classic of character comedy (check)
<i>Le Bourgeois gentilhomme</i>	A rich man who wants to be an aristocrat	Created with music by Lully for the court (check)
<i>Le Malade imaginaire</i>	A hypochondriac	The last play; Molière is said to have fallen ill during a performance and died soon after (check the story, which is well known but tidier than the records may allow)

Molière's company eventually became part of the Comédie-Française, founded in 1680 and still the national theatre (check). The French language is sometimes called "the language of Molière", a phrase that shows the status of his work.

La Fontaine and the Fables

Jean de La Fontaine (1621 to 1695) published his *Fables* in several collections from 1668 onward (check). They retell stories from ancient writers such as Aesop, with animals standing for human types: the cunning fox, the vain crow, the grasshopper and the ant. They are written in flexible, witty verse and carry sharp comments on power and the court. Generations of French children have learnt them by heart, which makes them one of the most widely shared texts in the language.

Madame de Lafayette

The same period produced one of the first great French novels of psychological analysis, *La Princesse de Clèves*, published in 1678 and attributed to Madame de Lafayette (check the authorship and the date). Set in a Renaissance court, it follows a married woman who falls in

love and confesses it to her husband. It was the subject of a debate when first published, and again in recent years when it was ridiculed by a politician and defended by readers (check the details).

Seeing a play versus reading it

A play is written to be performed. If you can see Molière in a theatre or on film, do: the timing of the jokes is part of the writing. If you read Racine, read it aloud, so you can hear the alexandrine.

Check the details

Dates of first performances, the story of Molière's death and the authorship of *La Princesse de Clèves* are all areas where popular accounts differ from the records. Confirm them in a scholarly edition or reference work before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain two of the rules of French classical drama and say what effect each had on the plays.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe the difference between Corneille and Racine, and explain why the quarrel over *Le Cid* shows the state's involvement in literary taste.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose one play by Molière or one fable by La Fontaine, and describe its target and how the writer attacks it.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Rules:** three unities, propriety, verisimilitude, the alexandrine
- **Corneille:** Le Cid (1637) and the quarrel it caused
- **Racine:** Andromaque, Phèdre; passion and guilt
- **Molière:** Tartuffe, Le Misanthrope, L'Avare, Le Bourgeois gentilhomme
- **La Fontaine:** the Fables; animals as human types
- **Lafayette:** La Princesse de Clèves (1678)
- **Check:** performance dates, Molière's death story, authorship

Next chapter: The Enlightenment, which covers Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau.

French Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · The Enlightenment

In the eighteenth century a group of French writers decided that the way to improve the world was to question everything: religion, government, law and custom. They are called the philosophes, and they wrote novels, plays, essays, letters and a vast encyclopaedia, always in the belief that reason, spread widely enough, would change society. They were sometimes imprisoned and often exiled, and their books were burned. This chapter looks at four of them. It is also the chapter in which the writer as public figure, the theme of the whole course, first becomes fully visible. Names, dates and attributions are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Salons and the Republic of Letters

Ideas spread through printed books, but also through conversation. In the salons of Paris, hostesses such as Madame Geoffrin and, later, Julie de Lespinasse gathered writers, scientists, artists and aristocrats at regular dinners and receptions (check the names). The salons gave thinkers an audience, protection and a place to test their ideas. Women, who were excluded from the universities and the academies, played a central role in them. The writers thought of themselves as members of an international "republic of letters", corresponding across borders.

Four Voices

Writer	Known for	Idea
Montesquieu (1689 to 1755)	<i>Lettres persanes</i> (1721) and <i>De l'esprit des lois</i> (1748)	The first is a satire of French society seen through the eyes of two Persian visitors; the second argues that governments should be studied in their circumstances and that power should be divided to prevent abuse (check the dates and the titles)
Voltaire (1694 to 1778)	Letters, plays, histories and the satire <i>Candide</i> (1759)	Reason, tolerance and a sharp wit used against fanaticism and injustice (check the dates)

Writer	Known for	Idea
Denis Diderot (1713 to 1784)	The <i>Encyclopédie</i> , novels and art criticism	Knowledge gathered and made public, whatever the authorities thought (check)
Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 to 1778)	<i>Du contrat social</i> (1762), <i>Émile</i> and the <i>Confessions</i>	Natural goodness, the will of the people and the self as a subject (check the dates)

Voltaire

François-Marie Arouet, who wrote as Voltaire, was the most famous writer of his century. After a quarrel with a nobleman he was exiled and spent some time in England in the later 1720s, which shaped his admiration for English freedoms; his *Lettres philosophiques* (1734) praised them at the expense of France and caused a scandal (check the dates and the title). *Candide* (1759) is a short satirical tale that mocks the idea that everything happens for the best and ends with the advice to cultivate one's garden (check). Voltaire also campaigned, which brings in the case that opens this course's last thread.

The Calas affair

In 1762 a Protestant merchant in Toulouse, Jean Calas, was executed after being accused of killing his son to prevent him from converting to Catholicism (check the details).

Voltaire became convinced of his innocence, wrote a campaign of pamphlets and the *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763), and the verdict was overturned a few years later (check the dates). The case is often cited as the first great example of a writer using public opinion to challenge a judicial decision. Chapter 10 follows the thread from this case to Zola's *J'accuse* and beyond.

Diderot and the Encyclopédie

The *Encyclopédie*, edited by Denis Diderot with the mathematician Jean le Rond d'Alembert, appeared in volumes from 1751 to 1772 (check the details). It aimed to collect all human knowledge, including the practical arts of the trades, in a single reference work, and it attracted

contributions from many of the leading thinkers. Its articles sometimes hid critical comments about religion and the state behind ordinary-looking entries (check). The authorities repeatedly tried to suppress it, and at one point withdrew its licence, yet the work continued (check). Diderot also wrote novels and dialogues, such as *Jacques le fataliste*, in a free, playful style that looks forward to much later fiction (check).

Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, born in Geneva, stood somewhat apart from the other philosophes and quarrelled with several of them, including Voltaire (check). His *Du contrat social* (1762) begins with the famous sentence that man is born free and is everywhere in chains, and argues that legitimate government depends on the general will of the people (check the wording and the interpretation, which are debated). His book on education, *Émile*, and the *Confessions*, a frank autobiography published after his death, established the writer's own inner life as a subject (check the dates). *Émile* and the *Contrat social* were condemned in 1762, and he had to flee (check). His ideas were used by many sides in the Revolution that followed, and are still debated.

Reason and tolerance

The common ground of the philosophes: judge ideas by argument, not by authority.

Satire as a weapon

Humour let writers say dangerous things in forms that were harder to prosecute.

Publicity

Books, pamphlets and the Encyclopédie made opinion a force that rulers had to reckon with.

Disagreement

The philosophes did not form a single party; Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot differed on religion, civilisation and the role of feeling.

Read *Candide* first

If you read only one book from this chapter, read *Candide*. It is short, quick and funny, and it shows the Enlightenment's method in miniature: a cheerful theory is tested against suffering and found wanting.

Check the details

The Enlightenment is full of famous lines that were not said as quoted: the sentence about defending to the death someone's right to speak, mentioned in Chapter 1, is one, and the cake line is another. Dates of editions and the details of the Calas case are also worth confirming in a reliable reference before they are repeated.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the role of the salons in the Enlightenment and why women were central to them.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe the Calas affair and say why it is important for the history of the writer as public figure.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose two of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau and describe one point on which they agreed and one on which they differed.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Salons:** dinners and receptions run largely by women; protection and audience for writers
- **Montesquieu:** *Lettres persanes*, *De l'esprit des lois*; divided power
- **Voltaire:** *Candide*, the *Lettres philosophiques*, the Calas campaign

- **Diderot:** the Encyclopédie, with d'Alembert
- **Rousseau:** Du contrat social, Émile, the Confessions
- **Common ground:** reason, tolerance, publicity
- **Check:** dates, famous quotations, details of the Calas case

Next chapter: Romanticism & the Great Novel, which covers Hugo, Dumas, Stendhal and George Sand.

French Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Romanticism and the Novel

After the Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, French writers turned from the rules of the Grand Siècle to feeling, the individual and the past. Romanticism, as the movement is called, rejected the classical unities, praised genius and passion, and found its largest audience not in the theatre but in the novel. Newspapers began to publish fiction in instalments, and a mass readership appeared. This chapter follows the Romantic generation: the poets, the dramatist who started a theatre riot, the novelist who spent eighteen years in exile, the creator of the musketeers, and a woman who wrote under a man's name. Names, dates and attributions are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

What Romanticism Meant

Feeling over rules

Writers valued emotion, imagination and originality above the strict forms of classical drama.

The past

Medieval and historical settings, from cathedrals to chivalry, were fashionable, partly in reaction against the Enlightenment and the Revolution.

Nature and the self

Landscape, solitude and personal suffering were central themes, especially in poetry.

A wider audience

Cheaper printing and the daily newspaper created readers who had never been to a salon.

The Poets

Alphonse de Lamartine, Alfred de Vigny and Alfred de Musset are among the main Romantic poets, along with Hugo himself (check the names). Their verse often turns on lost love, melancholy and the contrast between the poet and a society that does not understand him. It remains widely taught, and many French people can still recite lines from school.

Victor Hugo

Victor Hugo (1802 to 1885) was the towering figure of the century and wrote poetry, plays and novels on a huge scale (check the dates). His play *Hernani*, staged in 1830, is said to have provoked a riot between supporters of the classical rules and the young Romantics who came to defend it, in what is remembered as the "battle of Hernani" (check this carefully, since the story is much repeated and the details are probably exaggerated). His novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), known in English as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, brought the medieval cathedral back into popular imagination, and is sometimes credited with helping to start a movement to restore it (check the claim). *Les Misérables* (1862) follows a former convict through nineteenth-century France and is among the best-known novels in the world.

The exile

Hugo opposed the coup by which Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte made himself emperor in 1851, and went into exile on the Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey, where he stayed for about eighteen years and wrote some of his greatest work (check the dates and places). He returned to France after the fall of the Second Empire in 1870. When he died in 1885, he was given a state funeral and buried in the Panthéon (check). Chapter 10 follows the thread of the writer as public conscience through this exile.

Dumas and the Serial Novel

In the 1830s French newspapers began publishing novels in daily instalments, called *romans-feuilletons*, a format that drew in huge audiences and made writers rich (check the details). The master of the form was Alexandre Dumas (1802 to 1870), author of *Les Trois Mousquetaires* and *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*, both published in the mid-1840s (check the dates). His fast-moving adventures were written with the help of collaborators, notably Auguste Maquet, and the extent of that help has been debated (check). Dumas's grandmother was an enslaved woman in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, and his father, a general in the Revolutionary armies, was of mixed ancestry (check the details). Dumas himself faced racist mockery in his lifetime, and his remains were moved to the Panthéon in 2002 (check).

Stendhal and George Sand

Writer	Known for	Note
Stendhal (Henri Beyle, 1783 to 1842)	<i>Le Rouge et le Noir</i> (1830), <i>La Chartreuse de Parme</i> (1839)	Cool, ironic analysis of ambition and love; often called a bridge between Romanticism and Realism (check the dates)
George Sand (Aurore Dupin, 1804 to 1876)	<i>Indiana</i> , <i>La Mare au diable</i> and dozens of other novels	Wrote under a male pen name, wore men's clothes in public at times, and was involved in the politics of 1848; her relationships with Musset and Chopin are much discussed (check)

The pen name

Sand's choice of a male name was partly practical, since female novelists faced prejudice, and partly an act of self-invention. It was not unusual for women writers of the century. When you meet a famous pen name, ask what it made possible for the person using it.

Check the details

The riot at *Hernani*, the effect of Hugo's novel on the restoration of Notre-Dame and the extent of Dumas's collaborators are all stories where the legend outruns the record. Confirm dates and claims in a scholarly source before repeating them.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe three features of French Romanticism and explain how each differed from classical writing.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain what a roman-feuilleton was and how it changed the relationship between writers and readers.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Describe Hugo's exile and explain why it matters to the idea of the writer as public conscience.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Romanticism:** feeling over rules, the past, nature and self, a wider audience
- **Poets:** Lamartine, Vigny, Musset, Hugo
- **Hugo:** Hernani (1830), Notre-Dame de Paris (1831), Les Misérables (1862); exile from 1851
- **Dumas:** the serial novel; Les Trois Mousquetaires, Monte-Cristo
- **Stendhal:** Le Rouge et le Noir; a bridge to Realism
- **George Sand:** pen name; many novels and a public life
- **Check:** the Hernani riot, collaborator claims, dates

Next chapter: Realism & Naturalism, which covers Balzac, Flaubert, Zola and the Dreyfus affair.

French Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Realism and Naturalism

By the middle of the nineteenth century, many French novelists had grown tired of Romantic heroes and sweeping emotion, and wanted to describe society as it was: its money, its provincial towns, its marriages, its factories and its slums. The movement was called Realism, and its more scientific offshoot, Naturalism, treated the novel almost as a laboratory. This chapter follows that tradition from Balzac to Zola, and ends with the moment when a novelist's open letter on the front page of a newspaper helped reopen one of the most divisive cases in French history. Names, dates and attributions are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked. The chapter reports the Dreyfus affair as history and does not treat it as a matter on which there are two sides to the facts.

Balzac and the Human Comedy

Honoré de Balzac (1799 to 1850) set out to portray the whole of French society in a connected series of novels and stories, which he called *La Comédie humaine*, "the human comedy" (check the details). It contains dozens of works, and many characters reappear from one book to another (check the number, which varies by count). *Le Père Goriot* (1835), the story of a father ruined by his two daughters and the ambitious young man who watches, is among the most read (check). Balzac wrote at tremendous speed, fuelled, it is said, by large amounts of coffee (check, since the story is much repeated). His subject was money, ambition and the way society shapes character.

Flaubert and Madame Bovary

Gustave Flaubert (1821 to 1880) is famous for his search for the exact word, *le mot juste*, and for the long labour he put into each sentence (check the phrase and its attribution). His novel *Madame Bovary*, published in instalments in a journal in 1856 and 1857, follows the wife of a provincial doctor whose romantic dreams, fed by novels, lead to adultery, debt and suicide (check the details). The book was prosecuted for offending public morals, and Flaubert and his publisher were tried in 1857 and acquitted (check). The trial made the book famous.

Madame Bovary, c'est moi

A line commonly attributed to Flaubert says that he is Madame Bovary. There is no firm evidence that he said it in those words, and scholars treat it as a legend, although it expresses something about how the novelist merges with the character (check the details). The book is also famous for its cool, detached narration, which does not tell the reader what to think of Emma Bovary and so left it open to the accusation that it approved of her.

Zola and Naturalism

Émile Zola (1840 to 1902) took Realism further. He argued that the novelist should study society as a scientist studies nature, observing how heredity and environment shape people (check the description). His main project was a cycle of twenty novels, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, following one family through the Second Empire, published between 1871 and 1893 (check the details). The best known include *L'Assommoir*, about alcoholism in a working-class district, and *Germinal* (1885), about a coal miners' strike (check the dates). Zola researched his books closely, visiting mines, markets and slums. His books were controversial for their frankness, and their sympathy for working people.

Writer	Method	Subject
Balzac	A connected cycle of novels	The whole of society: money, ambition, class
Flaubert	Careful, detached style	Provincial life, disappointed dreams
Zola	Research and the idea of the novel as an experiment	Work, heredity, poverty and power
Maupassant (1850 to 1893)	The short story	Peasants, clerks, soldiers and the middle class; a pupil of Flaubert (check)

The Dreyfus Affair and J'accuse

In 1894 Alfred Dreyfus, a French army captain who was Jewish, was convicted of passing secrets to Germany and sentenced to imprisonment on Devil's Island, off the coast of South America (check the details). Evidence soon emerged that the real culprit was another officer, but the army resisted reopening the case, and France divided bitterly into those who wanted a retrial and

those who defended the army. Antisemitism was a major force in the affair (check the extent). On 13 January 1898 Zola published an open letter to the president of the Republic in the newspaper *L'Aurore*, under the headline *J'accuse*, "I accuse", naming officers and officials he believed were responsible for the injustice (check the date and the details).

Zola's risk

He was prosecuted for libel, convicted, and left for England to avoid prison (check the details).

The outcome

Dreyfus was pardoned in 1899 and formally cleared in 1906 (check the dates).

"The intellectuals"

The word came into wide use in this period for writers and academics who took a public stand, and it is part of the history of the writer as public conscience (check the origin).

Zola's death

He died in 1902 from carbon monoxide poisoning, generally attributed to a blocked chimney, though rumours of murder have circulated (check; the official account is accidental).

Check the details

The Dreyfus affair is one of the most heavily documented episodes in French history, yet it has also produced many stories. Confirm dates and the sequence of events in a scholarly history, and treat anecdotes about Zola's death or Balzac's habits with the caution they deserve.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Distinguish Balzac, Flaubert and Zola by method and by subject, in one sentence each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe the trial of Madame Bovary and explain how the line "Madame Bovary, c'est moi" is treated by scholars.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain what Zola did in January 1898, what it cost him, and why it is part of the history of the writer as public conscience.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Balzac:** La Comédie humaine; Le Père Goriot
- **Flaubert:** Madame Bovary; the 1857 trial; le mot juste
- **Zola:** Naturalism; Les Rougon-Macquart; Germinal
- **Maupassant:** the short story
- **Dreyfus affair:** conviction 1894; J'accuse 13 January 1898; cleared 1906
- **Check:** the "c'est moi" line, dates, anecdotes

Next chapter: Poetry From Baudelaire to Surrealism, which covers Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Apollinaire and Breton.

French Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · Poetry to Surrealism

While the novelists of the nineteenth century described society, a series of French poets did something stranger: they set out to change what poetry was. In about seventy years the art moved from rhymed regular verse to free verse, from description to suggestion, from sense to dream. The poets themselves were often scandalous, poor or short-lived, and their influence was out of proportion to their numbers. This chapter follows that line from Baudelaire, through the Symbolists, to the Surrealists. Poetry loses a great deal in translation, so the chapter describes the poets and their ideas and quotes almost nothing. Names, dates and attributions are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Baudelaire

Charles Baudelaire (1821 to 1867) published his collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil) in 1857 (check). It deals with beauty and decay, desire and boredom, and the modern city of Paris. The poems were prosecuted for offending public morals, in the same year as the trial of *Madame Bovary* (Chapter 7), and the poet was fined and had to remove six poems (check the details). The ban on those poems was formally lifted in the twentieth century (check the date). Baudelaire also wrote prose poems, art criticism and essays on modern life, in which he described the figure of the *flâneur*, the idle stroller who observes the city (check). He is often called the first modern poet.

Verlaine and Rimbaud

Paul Verlaine (1844 to 1896)

A poet of musical, melancholy verse, much set to music, including by Fauré and Debussy (check; see French Music 4). His life was unsettled by drink and by his turbulent relationship with Rimbaud.

Arthur Rimbaud (1854 to 1891)

A teenage prodigy who wrote his major poetry in a few years, including *Le Bateau ivre* (1871) and the prose-poem sequence *Une saison en enfer* (1873), and who stopped writing before he was twenty-one (check the dates).

Their quarrel

In 1873, in Brussels, Verlaine shot and wounded Rimbaud during a quarrel and was sentenced to two years in prison (check the details).

After poetry

Rimbaud left Europe and worked as a trader in East Africa, and died in Marseille after an illness (check).

The poet as visionary

In letters of 1871, Rimbaud described the poet as a seer who must make himself so through a long, deliberate disordering of the senses, and wrote that "I" is someone else (check the wording of the letters). These statements were later seen as a charter for modern poetry: the self is not given but made, and the poet's job is not to describe but to see differently. Whatever one thinks of the method, the idea shaped every poetic movement that followed.

Mallarmé and Symbolism

Stéphane Mallarmé (1842 to 1898), a schoolteacher by profession, led the Symbolist movement, which held that poetry should suggest rather than state (check). His verse is dense, elliptical and often very hard to read, even for French speakers. His long poem *Un coup de dés* (1897), laid out across the page with varying type and large white spaces, is regarded as a forerunner of experimental poetry (check the date). Mallarmé gathered writers and artists at his Tuesday evening gatherings in Paris (check). His poem about a faun inspired Debussy's orchestral prelude, discussed in French Music 4 (check).

Apollinaire and Surrealism

Writer	Work	Note
Guillaume Apollinaire (1880 to 1918)	<i>Alcools</i> (1913), <i>Calligrammes</i> (1918)	Dropped punctuation, wrote poems shaped like objects on the page; credited with coining the word "surrealism" in 1917 (check); died of influenza in 1918 after being wounded in the war (check)

Writer	Work	Note
André Breton (1896 to 1966)	<i>Manifeste du surréalisme</i> (1924)	Leader of the Surrealist group; defined the movement as pure psychic automatism (check the wording)
Paul Éluard, Louis Aragon and others	Poetry and prose	Surrealist writers who later followed varied political paths (check)

The Surrealists believed that logic and convention had stifled the imagination, and they looked to dreams, chance and the unconscious as sources. One method they used was automatic writing, in which the writer sets words down rapidly without censoring them (check the description). Surrealism was a movement of painters and film-makers as well as writers, and it had effects far beyond Paris. Its poetry ranges from the playful to the political, and its reputation has risen and fallen over the decades.

Reading poetry in translation

Poetry is the hardest form to translate, and the poets in this chapter depend heavily on sound. Use a dual-language edition, read the French aloud even if you cannot understand every word, and compare more than one translation. A short poem read three times is better than a long one skimmed.

Check the details

The lives of Verlaine and Rimbaud are surrounded by anecdotes, and dates of publication for the collections vary between editions. The lifting of the Baudelaire ban, the coining of "surrealism" and Breton's definition are also worth confirming in a reliable reference work.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why Baudelaire is called the first modern poet and what happened to *Les Fleurs du mal* in 1857.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe the idea of the poet as seer in Rimbaud's letters of 1871 and say why it mattered for later movements.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare Symbolism and Surrealism: what did each believe poetry should do, and how did their methods differ?

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Baudelaire:** Les Fleurs du mal (1857); trial; the flâneur
- **Verlaine and Rimbaud:** musical verse; the teenage prodigy; the 1873 shooting
- **Mallarmé:** Symbolism; suggestion over statement; Un coup de dés
- **Apollinaire:** Alcools, Calligrammes; the word "surrealism"
- **Breton:** the 1924 manifesto; automatic writing
- **Check:** publication dates, the lifting of the ban, Breton's definition

Next chapter: Proust, Existentialism & After, which covers Proust, Gide, Camus, Sartre, Beauvoir and the Nouveau Roman.

French Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Proust and Existentialism

The twentieth century asked new questions of the novel. What is memory? What is a self? What does a person owe to others in a world without certainties, in the shadow of two world wars and an occupation? French writers answered with some of the most ambitious and most discussed books of the century, and in the 1940s and 1950s the cafés of Paris became the stage of a philosophical movement that gave the world a new word, existentialism. This chapter follows that story from Proust to the Nouveau Roman. Names, dates and attributions are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked. The political disagreements among these writers are reported without taking sides.

Marcel Proust

Marcel Proust (1871 to 1922) spent the last years of his life in a cork-lined bedroom in Paris, writing *À la recherche du temps perdu*, usually translated as *In Search of Lost Time* (check the details of the room, which is partly legend). The work runs to seven volumes, published between 1913 and 1927, the last ones after his death (check the dates). Its narrator recalls his childhood and his adult life in Paris high society, and the book is a study of memory, desire, jealousy, art and time. The most famous scene is that in which the taste of a small cake dipped in tea, a madeleine, brings back a whole forgotten childhood (check the details). Proust paid to publish the first volume himself after it was refused by publishers, including a firm whose reader was André Gide, who later admitted his mistake (check the story).

Involuntary memory

Proust's central idea is that real memory is not deliberate recall but involuntary: it arrives suddenly through a taste, a smell or a sound, and brings back the past more fully than effort can. The idea has influenced writers well beyond France, and the madeleine has become a general symbol for any trigger of memory.

André Gide

André Gide (1869 to 1951) was a writer, critic and founder of a major literary review, the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, which shaped French taste for decades (check). His novels and journals explore moral freedom and the courage to be honest with oneself, including about his own sexuality. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947 (check). He is a bridge between the generation of Proust and the generation of the existentialists, several of whom he influenced.

Existentialism

After the Second World War, existentialism became fashionable in Paris, associated with the cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and the writers Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus (check). The term covers varied views, but a common theme is that there is no fixed human nature or pre-given meaning: individuals are free, and are responsible for what they make of themselves.

Writer	Key works	Ideas
Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 to 1980)	<i>La Nausée</i> (1938), <i>L'Être et le néant</i> (1943), plays	Existence precedes essence; freedom and responsibility; the committed writer (check the dates); he declined the Nobel Prize in 1964 (check)
Simone de Beauvoir (1908 to 1986)	<i>Le Deuxième Sexe</i> (1949), <i>Les Mandarins</i> (1954)	A founding text of modern feminism, arguing that one is not born but becomes a woman (check the wording); novels, memoirs and philosophy
Albert Camus (1913 to 1960)	<i>L'Étranger</i> (1942), <i>Le Mythe de Sisyphe</i> , <i>La Peste</i> (1947)	The absurd: the clash between human longing for meaning and a silent world; he rejected the label existentialist (check); Nobel Prize in 1957

Camus was born in French Algeria, and the Algerian War of the 1950s and 1960s bore heavily on his later life and reputation (check the details). In 1952 he and Sartre quarrelled publicly over political violence and the Soviet Union, and the friendship ended (check). The quarrel is still argued over, with admirers on both sides. Camus died in a car accident in 1960 (check).

Committed literature

Sartre argued that writers cannot be neutral: to write is to act, and to choose not to speak

The absurd

Camus's term for the gap between our need for meaning and the world's silence. His

is also a choice. This links the movement directly to Chapter 10.

answer was revolt and lucidity, not despair (check the description).

Women's lives

Beauvoir's work examined how society shapes the roles of women, a question that had a large effect on later feminist writing.

The cafés

The Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots in Saint-Germain-des-Prés are remembered as meeting places for the group (check).

The Nouveau Roman and the Absurd Stage

In the 1950s a group of novelists, including Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor and Claude Simon, rejected the traditional novel with its plot, character and moral (check the names). The group was called the Nouveau Roman, the "new novel", though its members did not form a school and disagreed among themselves. Robbe-Grillet argued for descriptions of objects without human meaning, and Sarraute for the tiny movements of feeling beneath conversation (check). Claude Simon received the Nobel Prize in 1985 (check). In the theatre, writers such as Eugène Ionesco and the Irish writer Samuel Beckett, who wrote in French, created plays in which language breaks down and nothing much happens, a style called the theatre of the absurd (check the label and the dates).

Where to start

Camus's *L'Étranger* is short and direct, and it is a good entry point to the whole postwar period. For Proust, begin with the first volume and the madeleine scene. Do not try to read the whole work at once.

Check the details

Dates of publication, Nobel years and the exact wording of famous lines, such as Beauvoir's sentence on becoming a woman, differ in popular accounts. The Sartre and Camus quarrel in particular is often retold with a clear villain, which is not how the sources read. Confirm in a scholarly biography before repeating.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain Proust's idea of involuntary memory and why the madeleine scene is so famous.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Compare Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus: name one work by each and one idea each held, noting where Camus differed from the others.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Describe what the Nouveau Roman rejected in the traditional novel and name two of its writers.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Proust:** In Search of Lost Time (1913 to 1927); involuntary memory; the madeleine
- **Gide:** the Nouvelle Revue Française; Nobel Prize 1947
- **Sartre:** La Nausée; existence precedes essence; commitment
- **Beauvoir:** Le Deuxième Sexe (1949)
- **Camus:** L'Étranger, La Peste; the absurd; Nobel Prize 1957
- **Nouveau Roman:** Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, Butor, Simon
- **Absurd theatre:** Ionesco, Beckett
- **Check:** dates, quotations, the Sartre and Camus quarrel

Next chapter: Capstone: The Writer as Public Conscience, which follows one thread from Voltaire to the present day.

French Literature

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · The Writer as Conscience

Chapter 1 asked whether French literature is a set of masterpieces, a national institution or a long argument about what a writer is for. This final chapter follows the third answer. Across two and a half centuries, French writers have repeatedly stepped out of their books to defend a person, oppose a ruler or challenge a policy, and the French public has come to expect it. The chapter traces that thread from Voltaire to the present, adds some of the contemporary and Francophone voices that the earlier chapters mostly left out, and asks how far the tradition is a strength and how far a burden. The chapter reports the disagreements among the writers and about them without taking a side. Names, dates and attributions are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Four Moments

Moment	Writer	What was done	Chapter
The Calas affair (1762 onwards)	Voltaire	A campaign of pamphlets and a treatise on tolerance helped overturn an unjust execution (check the dates)	5
The coup of 1851	Victor Hugo	Opposed the new emperor and spent about eighteen years in exile rather than keep silent (check)	6
The Dreyfus affair (1898)	Émile Zola	Published <i>J'accuse</i> , was convicted of libel and left for England (check)	7
The postwar decades	Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus	Argued that writing is a form of action, and took public positions on war, colonialism and the Cold War (check)	9

The pattern across the four is not that the writers were always right. It is that each used the prestige of a literary name to draw public attention to a case, and that the French public accepted this as a legitimate role. Whether the role is admirable or presumptuous is itself an old argument.

The Algerian War and the Writers

The war in Algeria, which ended in 1962, divided French intellectuals (check the dates). In 1960 a statement signed by 121 writers, artists and academics, including Sartre and Beauvoir, defended the right of conscripts to refuse to fight (check the number and the details). The authorities responded with sanctions against some of the signatories. Camus, born in Algeria, found himself in a position that satisfied neither side (check the description), and the argument over the war and over the writers' positions continues. The point for this chapter is that the tradition did not guarantee agreement: public conscience is exercised by writers who disagree with each other.

Contemporary Voices

Patrick Modiano

Born in 1945 (check); his short novels return to the German Occupation and the traces it left on Paris, and he received the Nobel Prize in 2014 (check). His public role is as a writer of memory.

Annie Ernaux

Born in 1940 (check); her books draw on her own working-class origins, family and experiences to study class and memory, and she received the Nobel Prize in 2022 (check). She has also taken public political positions.

J. M. G. Le Clézio

A writer connected to Brittany and Mauritius who has written widely about travel, childhood and other cultures; Nobel Prize in 2008 (check).

A wider conversation

Many more writers could be named; the list above is a sample, not a ranking.

Francophone Voices

French is spoken and written in many countries, and some of the most influential French-language writers came from places colonised by France.

Writer	From	Known for
Aimé Césaire (1913 to 2008)	Martinique	The long poem <i>Cahier d'un retour au pays natal</i> and the essay <i>Discours sur le colonialisme</i> ; a founder of the <i>négritude</i> movement; long-time mayor of Fort-de-France (check the dates and titles)
Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906 to 2001)	Senegal	Poet, a founder of <i>négritude</i> , first president of independent Senegal and the first African elected to the Académie française (check the details)
Maryse Condé (1934 to 2024)	Guadeloupe	Novelist whose works, including <i>Ségou</i> , look at the history of Africa and the Caribbean (check)

Négritude was a literary and political movement, begun by black students and writers in Paris in the 1930s, that affirmed African identity and culture against colonial assumptions (check the origin and the figures). It is a clear case of the course's theme from another direction: writers using the French language, and French literary institutions, to argue with France itself. The earlier question in the Académie française chapter returns here too: who decides what counts as French literature?

Tradition and burden

The French expectation that writers will speak on public matters gives literature unusual weight, and it has produced real acts of courage. It has also produced pronouncements by famous writers on subjects they did not understand, and some positions that look badly in hindsight. Defenders say that the tradition keeps writers engaged with the world; critics say it can make fame a substitute for expertise. The chapter reports the argument and does not settle it.

Back to the Question

Chapter 1 asked whether French literature is a set of masterpieces, a national institution or a long argument about what a writer is for. The chapters since suggest that it is all three. The masterpieces, from the *Chanson de Roland* to *Madame Bovary* and Proust, are known because institutions taught, prized and defended them. The institutions, from the Académie française to the prizes and the salons, shaped what writers could say and how they were heard. And the

argument, from Montaigne's tolerance through Voltaire's campaigns to Zola's open letter, is what ties the other two together.

A habit to take away

When you read a French writer, ask three questions. What was happening in the country when this was written? What did the writer risk, or gain, by writing it? And who was the writer arguing with? These questions work for any literature in any country, and they are the real subject of the course.

Check the details

The Algerian war, the declaration of the 121 and the careers of living or recently living writers are the most contested material in this course. Confirm dates, prizes and the wording of statements in reliable sources, and read the arguments in the words of the people who made them.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose three of the four moments in the table and describe, for each, what the writer did and what it cost or risked.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain *négritude* in a few sentences and say how it shows writers using French to argue with France.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Using at least three chapters of the course, argue whether French literature is best understood as masterpieces, an institution or an argument, or as a mixture, and give your reasons.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Thread:** Voltaire (Calas), Hugo (exile), Zola (J'accuse), Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus
- **Algerian war:** the 1960 declaration of the 121; writers disagreed
- **Contemporary:** Modiano, Ernaux, Le Clézio
- **Francophone:** Césaire, Senghor, Condé; négritude
- **Tension:** tradition and burden; report both views
- **Question:** masterpieces, institution or argument? All three
- **Check:** dates, prizes, the wording of statements

Course complete. For related subjects, see French Music, which follows the same story of state support and cultural argument in song, and French Film & Television, which does so on the screen.