

## What Was 'The Enlightenment'?

We hear about it all the time. It was a pivotal point in European history, paving the way for centuries of history afterward, but what was 'The Enlightenment'? Why is it called 'The Enlightenment'? Why did the period end?

The Enlightenment Period is also referred to as the Age of Reason and the "long 18th century". It stretched from 1685 to 1815. The period is characterized by thinkers and philosophers throughout Europe and the United States that believed that humanity could be changed and improved through science and reason. Thinkers looked back to the Classical period, and forward to the future, to try and create a trajectory for Europe and America during the 18th century.

It was a volatile time marked by art, scientific discoveries, reformation, essays, and poetry. It began with the American War for Independence and ended with a bang when the French Revolution shook the world, causing many to question whether ideas of egalitarianism and pure reason were at all safe or beneficial for society. Opposing schools of thought, new doctrines and scientific theories, and a belief in the good of humankind would eventually give way the Romantic Period in the 19th century.

What is Enlightenment? Philosopher Immanuel Kant asked the self-same question in his essay of the same name. In the end, he came to the conclusion: "Dare to know! Have courage to use your own reason!"

This was an immensely radical statement for this time period. Previously, ideas like philosophy, reason, and science – these belonged to the higher social classes, to kings and princes and clergymen. Now, suddenly, reason was for the people. This idea would permeate the Age of Reason and set it alight.

French writers like Rousseau, Montesquieu, Buffon, Diderot, and, most famously, Voltaire, were at the head of the Enlightenment. Diderot wrote his *Encyclopédie* in 1751, which was the first attempt at compiling all human knowledge. It broke the barrier, insisting loudly that the universe could be broken down and demystified if one only applied one's reason. It was a bold, brash move. One that stood in the face of eras before.

American political writers like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson spoke of human rights and justice, freedom and equality. Thomas Paine, especially, in his essay "Common Sense" appealed to the reason of the people to make his political point.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment, influenced by the scientific revolutions of the previous century, believed in shedding the light of science and reason on the world in order to question traditional ideas and ways of doing things. The scientific revolution (based on empirical observation, and not on metaphysics or spirituality) gave the impression that the universe behaved according to universal and unchanging laws (think of Newton here). This provided a model for looking rationally on human institutions as well as nature.

These writers framed the dramatic shift in who "owned" ideas. Ideas and education were no longer for the privileged and rich of society. They belonged to everyone, and it was everyone's responsibility as human beings to have them.

# Art



Art during the Age of Enlightenment saw a shift from the opulent baroque style of the 17th century to a “art for the people” – a more simple, neoclassicism. Artists looked back to styles found in Classical and Renaissance-era creations, and used their art as their voice to spread their feelings and voice their opinions. The Enlightenment was the first time in European history that art served not only a political or religious agenda, sponsored by the rich in society, but also served as a medium of expression.

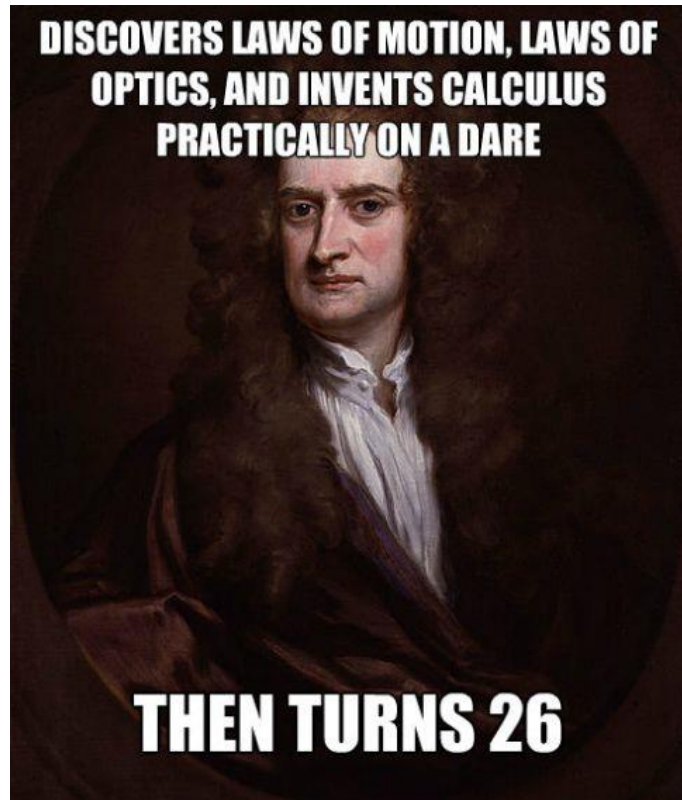
Artists expressed realism in works like William Hogarth’s street scenes of London, creating stark scenes of social criticism meant to draw emotion from the viewer.



A scene by William Hogarth. [PHOTO: [boston.com](http://boston.com)]

Music, too, saw a shift. Where complex baroque works like those of Bach and Handel were once popular in high courts, suddenly technical structure and clarity were more valued. Composers like Joseph Haydn and geniuses like [Mozart](#) paved the way for music that was brilliant, bright, and celebrated the natural elements of nature. See a pattern?

## Science



Sir Isaac Newton, everybody. [PHOTO: [pinterest](#)]

It's impossible to talk about the Enlightenment without talking about the political leaps and bounds made during the period. Historians trace the scientific beginnings of the Enlightenment back to Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, written in 1686. This work, combined with John Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (1689) are believed to be the basis for much of the science, math, and philosophy that propelled the Enlightenment forward.

Newton's calculus and other scientific theories gave other scientists precise ways to measure change. The period saw enormous leaps in understanding of medicine, math, and physics.

Benjamin Franklin discovered electricity and invented many items which we still use today, including the lightning rod and bifocals, and immensely influenced Thomas Malthus' rule of population growth.

These discoveries, developments, inventions, and theories would play an immense role in the common Industrial Revolution of the 19th and 20th centuries.



Joseph Wright of Derby, *A Philosopher Giving A Lecture at the Orrery*, c. 1765, oil on canvas, 147 x 203 cm (Derby Museum and Art Gallery, Derby, England)

Scientific experiments like the one pictured here were offered as fascinating shows to the public in the mid-eighteenth century. In Joseph Wright of Derby's painting *A Philosopher Giving A Lecture at the Orrery* (1765), we see the demonstration of an orrery, a mechanical model of the solar system that was used to demonstrate the motions of the planets around the sun—making the universe seem almost like a clock.

In the center of the orrery is a gas light, which represents the sun (though the figure who stands in the foreground with his back to us blocks this from our view); the arcs represent the orbits of the planets. Wright concentrates on the faces of the figures to create a compelling narrative.

With paintings like these, Wright invented a new subject: scenes of experiments and new machinery, and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution (think cities, railroads, steam power, gas and then electric light, factories, machines, pollution). Wright's fascination with light, strange shadows, and darkness, reveals the influence of Baroque art.

# Politics



PHOTO: [thegreatcourses.com](http://thegreatcourses.com)

The Enlightenment is said to truly have begun with the American Revolution in 1776. Ideas which had been swirling around people's heads through writers like Thomas Paine, John Locke, and Thomas Jefferson, finally culminated in the first attempt at a republic since Roman times. Like the rest of the Enlightenment period, America's founding fathers hearkened back to Classical times to draw up a plan for how they wanted to run their upstart country.

In England, Englishman William Wilberforce believed firmly in freedom for all men, and took it upon himself to abolish the slave trade throughout the British Empire...[and succeeded](#).

In Prussia, Frederick the Great (1712-1786) unified the country, supported the arts, music, philosophy, science, and encouraged 'enlightened' ideas in his country, effectively modernizing his country and bringing Prussia up to speed with the rest of Europe. In Russia, Catherine the Great (1729-1796), did the same, turning Russia into a major world power beneath her fingertips.

Rousseau, for example, began to question the idea of the divine right of Kings. In *The Social Contract*, he wrote that the King does not, in fact, receive his power from God, but rather from the general will of the people. This, of course, implies that "the people" can also take away that power! The Enlightenment thinkers also discussed other ideas that are the founding principles of any democracy—the idea of the importance of the individual who can reason for himself, the idea of equality under the law, and the idea of natural rights. The Enlightenment was a period of profound optimism, a sense that with science and reason—and the consequent shedding of old superstitions—human beings and human society would improve.

You can probably tell already that the Enlightenment was anti-clerical; it was, for the most part, opposed to traditional Catholicism. Instead, the Enlightenment thinkers developed a way of understanding the universe called Deism—the idea, more or less, is that there is a God, but that this God is not the figure of the Old and New Testaments, actively involved in human affairs. He is more like a watchmaker who, once he makes the watch and winds it, has nothing more to do with it.

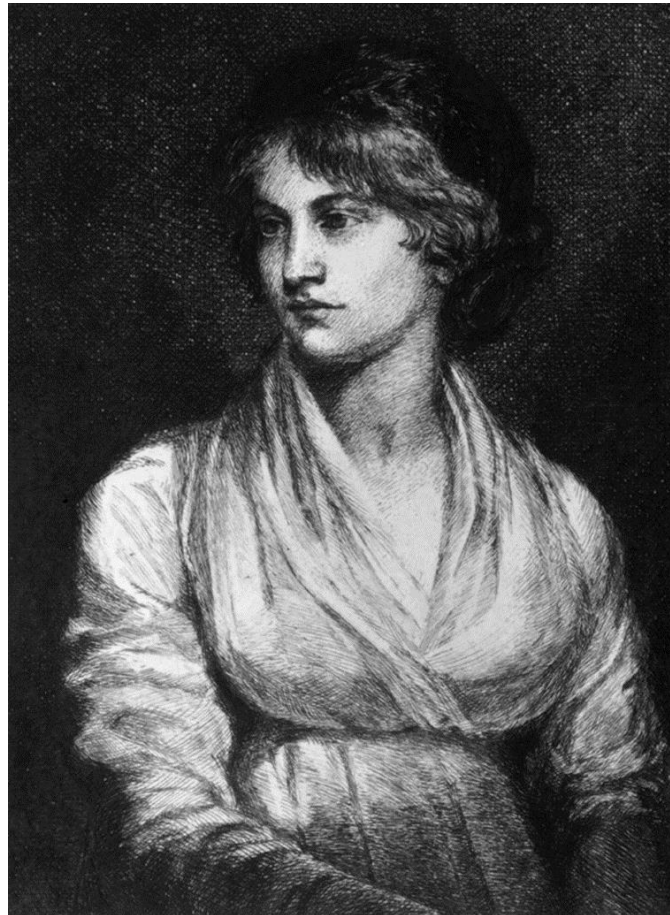
# The Enlightenment, the monarchy and the French Revolution

Denis Diderot, Enlightenment philosopher, writer and art critic, wrote that the aim of art was "to make virtue attractive, vice odious, ridicule forceful; that is the aim of every honest man who takes up the pen, the brush or the chisel" (*Essai sur la peinture*).

These new ways of thinking, combined with a financial crisis (the country was bankrupt) and poor harvests left many ordinary French people both angry and hungry. In 1789, the French Revolution began. In its initial stage, the revolutionaries asked only for a constitution that would limit the power of the king.

Ultimately the idea of a constitution failed, and the revolution entered a more radical stage. In 1792 King Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette were deposed and ultimately beheaded along with thousands of other aristocrats believed to be loyal to the monarchy.

The Enlightenment encouraged criticism of the corruption of the monarchy (at this point King Louis XVI), and the aristocracy. Enlightenment thinkers condemned Rococo art for being immoral and indecent, and called for a new kind of art that would be moral instead of immoral, and teach people right and wrong.



Mary Wollstonecraft. [PHOTO <https://britlitsurvey2.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/mary.jpg>]

Mary Wollstonecraft, early feminist and writer in London, England, saw the changes and read about egalitarianism and sought to implement it in England for women as well as men. During her career in the late 1700s, she wrote all sorts of essays, treatises, and speeches. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, written in 1792, argued the unthinkable: women were *not* naturally inferior to men, but only seemed so because they were denied the same education. She argued that women ought to be treated the same as men, and advocated for a society entirely founded on reason.

And in France, the people were getting restless under their despotic rulers. The Enlightenment was sweeping Europe. The Americans had gained their freedom from Britain and created a new republic. The French wanted in.

In 1789, they revolted. They threw out all old authorities and attempted to remake society along completely rational lines, but it got completely out of control. In what historians call “The Reign of Terror”, they murdered thousands of people and spread fear of revolution throughout the rest of Europe. The chaos of the French Revolution would eventually lead to the rise of Napoleon.

## Decline



PHOTO: [history.com](https://www.history.com)

According to Encyclopedia Britannica’s [entry](#) on the subject, “The Enlightenment expired as the victim of its own excesses”. The Enlightenment was so focused on abstract reason and stoicism, above all other virtues, that some people grew tired of it and began to seek its opposite: emotion, sensationalism, and the softening of every moral value. This search was further sparked by the failure of the French Revolution and its ensuing Reign of Terror. After that disaster, few people believed that a reason-based, egalitarian society could, in fact, function.

One enduring philosophical thread remained, however: the idea that the human race was, as a whole, moving forward. The idea of progress. These beliefs and factors combined with the scientific leaps made during the Enlightenment would drive the world forward toward the Industrial period, and, to the philosophical, artistic, and literary period known as the Romantic Era.

Adapted from: <http://historythings.com/what-was-the-enlightenment/> and <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/monarchy-enlightenment/rococo/a/a-beginners-guide-to-the-age-of-enlightenment>