The Enlightenment

A Young Girl Reading
Jean-Honoré Fragonard
c. 1776
In the wake of the Scientific Revolution, and the new ways of thinking it prompted, scholars and philosophers began to reevaluate old notions about other aspects of society. This developed into the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that stressed reason and thought and the power of individuals to solve problems. It is also known as the Age of Reason.

Experiment on a bird in the Air Pump
Joseph Wright, 1768
Notes:

- Enlightenment: An intellectual movement that stressed reason and thought and the power of the individual to solve problems.
The Enlightenment started from some key ideas put forth by two English political thinkers of the 1600’s, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.

Thomas Hobbes
Unknown artist

John Locke
By Herman Verelst
Thomas Hobbes expressed his views in a work called *Leviathan* (1651). The horrors of the English Civil War convinced him that all humans were naturally selfish and wicked. Without governments to keep order, Hobbes said there would be “war... of every man against every man,” and life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”
Hobbes argued that to escape such a bleak life, people had to hand over their rights to a strong ruler. In exchange, they gained law and order. Hobbes called this agreement by which people created a government the social contract.
Hobbes also said that the ruler needed total power to keep citizens under control. The best government was an absolute monarchy, which could impose order and demand obedience.
John Locke, however, had a completely different view. He believed that people could learn from experience and improve themselves. As reasonable beings, they had the natural ability to govern their own affairs and to look after the welfare of society. Locke criticized absolute monarchies, and favored the idea of self-government.
According to Locke, all people are born free and equal, with three natural rights:

• Life
• Liberty
• Property

*Liberty Leading the People*
Eugene Delacroix, 1830
• What is an easy way to remember Locke’s 3 natural laws?
• To protect your PROPERTY, you LOCK it up!
According to Locke, the purpose of government is to protect these rights. If a government fails to do so, citizens have a right to overthrow it.

Pulling Down the Statue of King George III
Johannes Adam Simon Oertel, c. 1859.
Locke’s theory had a deep influence on modern political thinking. His belief that a government’s power comes from the consent of the people is the foundation of modern democracy.

*Congress Voting Independence*
Edward Savage and/or Robert Edge Pine
ca. 1776
The ideas of government by popular consent and the right to rebel against unjust rulers helped inspire struggles for liberty in Europe and the Americas.

*Storming the Bastille*

Artist unknown
The Enlightenment reached its height in France in the mid-1700s. Paris became the meeting place for people who wanted to discuss politics and ideas. The social critics of this period were known as “philosophes” (philosophers in French). The *philosophes* believed that people could apply reason to all aspects of life.

*Reading of the philosophers*
Collection Jean-Jacques Monney, Geneva
Five concepts formed the core of the philosophers’ belief:

1. **Reason**: Enlightened thinkers believed truth could be discovered through reason or logical thinking.

2. **Nature**: That what was natural was also good and reasonable.

3. **Happiness**: People were urged to seek well-being on Earth.

4. **Progress**: It was believed that society and humankind could improve.

5. **Liberty**: The philosophers called for the liberties that the English people had won in their Glorious Revolution and the Bill of Rights.
Voltaire

Probably the most brilliant and influential of the philosophers was Francois Marie Arouet. Using the pen name Voltaire, he published more than 70 books of political essays, philosophy, and drama.
Voltaire never stopped fighting for tolerance, reason, freedom of religious belief, and the freedom of speech. He summed up his staunch defense of liberty in one of his most famous quotes:

I do not agree with a word you say but will defend to the death your right to say it."
Baron de Montesquieu:

He devoted himself to the study of political liberty. He believed that Britain was the best-governed and most politically balanced country of his own day.
The British system was a three-branch government:

The British monarch and ministers held executive power. They carried out the laws of the state.

Parliament held the legislative power. They made the laws.

The judges of the English courts held judicial power. They interpreted the laws to see how each applied to a specific case.
Montesquieu called this division of power among different branches “separation of powers”. Although Montesquieu oversimplified the British system, he used this idea as part of his most famous book, *On the Spirit of Laws* (1748).
In his book, Montesquieu proposed that the separation of powers would keep any individual or group from gaining total control of the government. This idea was later called checks and balances.
Montesquieu’s book was admired by the political leaders in North America.

DeclARATION OF INDEPENDENCE  
John Trumbull, c. 1819
Jean Jacques Rousseau: Rousseau was passionately committed to individual freedom. He disagreed with Enlightenment thinkers on many matters.

by Maurice Quentin de La Tour, 1753
Rousseau believed that civilization corrupted people’s natural goodness. “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains”, he wrote. In 1762, he explained his philosophy in a book called The Social Contract.
Rousseau believed that the only good government was one that was freely formed by the people and guided by the “general will” of society – a direct democracy.
Rousseau also argued that all people were equal and that titles of nobility should be abolished.
Notes:

- Hobbes: the best form of government was an absolute monarchy.
- Locke: The three natural laws are life, liberty and property.
- Voltaire: Freedom of speech
- Montesquieu: Separation of power – executive, legislative and judicial branches of government
- Rousseau: Legitimate government comes from the people, and all people are equal (a direct democracy)
Legacy of the Enlightenment:

The first effect was a belief in progress. With the unlocking the mysteries of nature (Galileo, Newton), the growth of scientific knowledge seemed to quicken in the 1700s. Scientists made key new discoveries in chemistry, physics, biology, and mechanics. Philosophers also argued for greater social equality, as well as a more democratic style of government.
A second outcome was the rise of a more secular, or non-religious, outlook. During the Enlightenment, people began to question openly their religious beliefs and the teachings of the Catholic Church. Scientist began to discover that the mysteries of the universe could be explained mathematically.
The third outcome was the rise of individualism. The philosophers encouraged people to use their own ability to reason in order to judge what was right or wrong.

During the Enlightenment, reason took center stage (hence the name “The Age of Reason”!)
On a clean sheet of paper, write your name, then answer 3 of these questions:

• Today I learned....
• I was surprised by....
• The most useful thing I will take from this lesson is...
• I was interested in...
• What I liked most about this lesson was...
• One thing I’m not sure about is...
• The main thing I want to find out more about is...
• After this lesson, I feel...
• I might have gotten more from this lesson if...