

Biography Activity

The Enlightenment and Revolutions

Voltaire (1694–1778)

François-Marie Arouet was an Enlightenment writer who used the pseudonym “Voltaire.” Although he wrote many plays and epic poems, Voltaire is best known today for his ideas and philosophy. In particular, he argued against organized religion. He believed that people could understand the world through reason. To build happiness, he asserted, all people needed was a solid grasp of science and art. Voltaire also championed tolerance in religion and politics. Voltaire’s unorthodox beliefs and outspoken nature landed him in trouble several times. French officials imprisoned him once and exiled him as well. He traveled to the English court during this time and later visited many other places in Europe, including Berlin and Geneva. Voltaire returned to France late in life and died in Paris.



More About the Image: This anonymous oil portrait of the young Voltaire is in the Musée Antoine Lécuyer in Saint-Quentin, France.

- 1. Making Connections** How do modern U.S. society and government reflect Voltaire’s ideas?

- 2. Constructing Arguments** Do you think Voltaire was most drawn to democracy, despotism, or theocracy (government by church authority)? Justify your answer.
