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To all Incoming First Years reading French in 2026-27:

First of all: we are looking forward to your arrival at Teddy Hall and to teaching you during your course. This letter, which I am sending on behalf of the Tutors in French, is intended to clarify how the first-year course is structured and taught. It sets out a general outline of the Preliminary French course, together with some reading to do before you arrive in Oxford.

The course is designed to enable you to develop the different skills needed to make the most of a degree in Modern Languages – from translation through to essay writing and literary commentary, with all sorts in between! *If you are studying French with another language or Joint Schools, you'll receive something similar from the relevant tutors; if you are doing French sole you will also study extra French papers that are not addressed here, but will be detailed in a different note.*

You'll see that we suggest buying some of the books you will need in advance of arrival. Serious study starts with re-reading, so please do begin reading the texts we will be studying in the first term now. Please note that college Grant funds are available to support you in buying the books you will need. **You should retain the receipts for your book purchases as you will be able to apply for grant to cover some of the costs when you arrive.**

Language work (Papers I and II) All of your language teaching in the First Year is provided 'in house', by tutors in St Edmund Hall. There will be three languages classes a week, with preparation work to do for each one. These will explore translation between French and English texts, conversation, comprehension, and expression, and will help you develop your understanding of questions of both grammar and style.

You will need **language reference books** for language work throughout your course. There are no 'set' texts for this part of the course, but it would be good to **start to develop the habit of working at French grammar exercises yourselves *before* you begin the course.** For this, you might find having your own copy of the following useful: *Practising French Grammar: A Workbook*, by Roger Hawkins, Richard Towell, and Marie-Noëlle Lamy.

Other grammar books, bi-lingual dictionaries, and monolingual dictionaries will be available to use once you are here; if you want to know which ones to buy in advance for your own use, let me know, and I can send you a list. But most of the resources you will need are available in our College Library. There are also a number of excellent online resources available, eg through the LEXILOGOS gateway. The best dictionary on this gateway is, we think: Larousse, Wordreference: https://www.lexilogos.com/english/french_dictionary.htm

We recognise the existence of **AI technologies** such as ChatGPT, some of which are supported by the University. During your time here, the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages will develop further its guidance on how to use AI in your studies, what is allowable and what is not (especially in the context of assessment). At College level we look forward to discussing with you your previous experience of using ChatGPT and similar technologies. Together we'll explore the role AI might (and might not) sensibly play in complementing your own exploratory and rigorous study.

Literature work (Papers III and IV) The course does not require previous experience of the formal study of French literature. There are two first year literature papers, which introduce you to a range of literary texts composed in French and selected from different periods and different genres. You will also learn to explore different ways to write about your response to them in English. This is allows you to develop two skills at the same time: first, you will gradually build up your reading knowledge and understanding of French literary forms in a range of complex intersecting contexts; and secondly, you will develop your own critical voice in English. You do this both dialogue with other students and previous readers, critics and theorists of literature, and by writing your own commentaries and essays about these texts and their historical, political, and theoretical dimensions, as well as their formal and linguistic features.

Papers III and IV are taught through lectures, seminars, and tutorials. Weekly lectures are given by members of the Modern Languages Faculty in the Taylorian, and weekly seminars and/or tutorials are in College. The essay and commentary work you do in the first year will provide a firm grounding for the literary study you will do from the second year onwards.

We begin the course with two weeks of introductory reflection in seminars on academic literary, focusing on questions such as: what is a commentary? what makes for a meaningful essay? when we read a text, how do we go about identifying its narrative voice, style, and tone? what roles do history and theory play in our individual responses?

In the third week of term we'll begin exploring the **Paper III short texts** and introduce you to techniques close reading and writing commentaries. This paper is explored in seminar and tutorial and is assessed by a portfolio of commentaries on each of the 'set' texts. As we have only two weeks of term time to work together on each text, it is essential that you make a start on reading all three of the (not very long!) works to be explored in the first term (Michaelmas Term) **before** you arrive in Oxford. As noted above: serious study begins with re-reading.

Each of the four Paper III texts exemplifies a different genre of writing, while also addressing a number of recurrent themes: identity and community, nature and nurture, collective experience and the individual voice, sexuality, gender, and race: this term we'll explore C16th philosophical prose, C17th tragedy, and C20th drama. You will need to get your own copies in the editions recommended below:

1. Montaigne, 'Des Cannibales' from *Essais*, vol. 1 (*Essais*: 'Des cannibales' et 'Des coches', edited by M. Tarpinian, Éditions Ellipses, 1994).
2. Racine, *Phèdre* (edited by Raymond Picard, Gallimard 'Folio', 2015)
3. NDiaye, *Papa doit manger* (Éditions de minuit, 2003)

Please do acquire the recommended editions; some editions miss out sections of the work, and it is easier of we are all working from the same text. It is of course a waste of your time to read these books **only** in English translation: literature and language work go together.
You may find it helpful to read alongside a translation to begin with (especially with respect to the Montaigne essay); but your ability to read in French will improve over the year : don't worry if your progress is slow to begin with. We will complete the work on paper III in the **second term (Hilary Term),** weeks 1-2. The final short text we'll cover is a poetry collection:

4. Verlaine, *Romances sans paroles*, (edited by Arnaud Bernadet, édition avec dossier, 2e édition, Garnier-Flammarion, 2018).

Paper IV narrative fiction, a paper taught (and examined) by essay, begins in week 3 of Hilary Term. This paper introduces you to a further four texts, written between the Middle Ages and the twentieth century. Following on from the work on paper III, we will explore questions of form alongside matters of gender, sexuality, relationships, race, marginalisation, and identity, as well as the differing contexts that shape each text.
So, our schedule for the paper IV is as follows:

1. *La Chastelaine de Vergy* (édition bilingue, by J. Dufournet & L. Dulac, Folio Classique, 2010)
2. Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (edited by René Pomeau, Garnier-Flammarion, 1964; get the 2006 reprint if you can)
3. George Sand, *Indiana* (edited by Béatrice Didier, Folio Classique, 1984)

In the **third term (Trinity Term)**, we work on the final Paper IV narrative text in the first two weeks: Maryse Condé, *Traversée de la mangrove* (Paris: Mercure de France/Folio, 1992). Then we will revisit the texts and key questions of the first year and look ahead to your second-year work. We will also prepare for the Paper IV exam, which will take place in June; there will be plenty of time for revision.

If you have any questions, do get in touch by email, and we will try to answer them; make sure you also consult the Faculty website and virtual learning environment, where there is a good deal more information: https://www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk/

Bonne lecture, et bon courage!

Yours,



Wes Williams
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