

Section 1: The *Encyclopédie*

Unit 1 explains that the aim of the Encyclopedists (the *philosophes* who contributed to the *Encyclopédie*) was to provide a compendium of every branch of knowledge and every kind of relevant fact in the belief that the more we know, not only are we better informed but also 'more virtuous and happier' (Diderot, quoted on p.10).

The video emphasizes the central place of the *Encyclopédie* as an instrument of the Enlightenment, 'a huge collaborative enterprise compiled by Diderot and d'Alembert', with the participation of Voltaire, Rousseau and many other *philosophes*. The *Encyclopédie* was published between 1751 and 1772 in 28 volumes, plus 11 volumes of plates (see Figure V1.1). It contained 72,000 articles. Supplementary volumes appeared up to 1789.

Many of the articles questioned, explicitly or implicitly, existing values, beliefs and practices. Since the *Encyclopédie*, like all other books published in France, required royal permission or *privilège* and had to undergo scrutiny by a panel of censors, the contributors resorted to indirect means of getting across their message, commonly by the use of irony. (The article 'Adore', by Diderot, exemplifies one use of irony in its tone and the juxtaposition of the word 'adore' in the unexpected context of so-called 'secular worship' (the expression itself may be intended to be ironic):

ADORE (theology). This term, in its literal and etymological sense, means to carry to one's mouth, to kiss one's hand, or to kiss something, but with a feeling of reverence and awe. The three words *adore*, *honour*, *revere* are used for both religious and secular worship. In religious worship one *adores* God, one *honours* the Saints, one *reveres* relics and images. In the secular form of worship one *adores* a mistress ...

(Diderot, 1751, p.144; trans. Lentin)

Such devices to evade the censors did not always succeed, and in 1759 the *Encyclopédie* was temporarily banned.



Figure VI.1 A.J. Defebert, The art of writing, engraving from the *Encyclopédie*, Bodleian Library, Oxford. Photo: © Bodleian Library 2003.

The illustration exemplifies the view of the contributors to the *Encyclopédie* of the enterprise as a huge compendium of factual information and as a 'state of the art' guide to progress in 'the Arts, Sciences and Trades', presented with clarity, accuracy and precision. The illustration indicates the belief of the Encyclopedists in a definite art of writing, with its own rules and procedures, including the correct method of holding the quill pen.

Subterfuge was another device for evading censorship. From 1765, with the tacit consent of the government, the last ten volumes of the *Encyclopédie* continued to be published in Paris, but carried the imprint of a publisher in Neuchâtel, a Prussian enclave in Switzerland.

The *Encyclopédie* was extremely expensive as well as large and bulky. It had a restricted readership of around 4,000 subscribers for the first edition, though by the time of the French Revolution the number of subscribers to later editions was between 15,000 and 20,000. Voltaire expressed scepticism as to whether it could really change people's ways of thinking, as Diderot intended. Voltaire himself produced works that were shorter, snappier and wittier, and enjoyed a far larger readership, notably his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764) and his best-known book, the 'philosophical tale' *Candide* (1759), full of irony and black comedy.

Reference on video to Voltaire's *English Letters*, 1734: its full title was *Philosophical Letters or Letters on the English*. Voltaire's enthusiastic

account of British values and institutions, written up after a visit to England, and his implicit contrasts with France, made this book an early critique of the beliefs and practices of the Old Regime.

- EXERCISE**
- 1 How would you briefly describe the *Encyclopédie* to someone who had never heard of it?
 - 2 Why was the *Encyclopédie* so controversial in its time?
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- DISCUSSION**
- 1 The *Encyclopédie* was a multi-volume collection, published in France in the second half of the eighteenth century under the editorship of Diderot and d'Alembert, of articles contributed by many of the *philosophes*, containing factual information on most branches of knowledge and on a large variety of subjects.
 - 2 The *Encyclopédie* was considered controversial because it criticized, explicitly or implicitly, many of the established values, beliefs, institutions and practices of the Old Regime in France.
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