

AP[®] French Literature

Syllabus 1

Course Design

Most students come to the AP[®] French Literature course from the AP French Language course. During their preparation for the AP French Language Exam, students will have read some poems and short stories, but they are really new at reading whole novels or plays and at writing lengthy essays on literature. The course is designed to develop their enthusiasm for French literature, prepare them for the AP French Literature Exam (which they are all required to take), and give them some insights into the historical and sociological context of the works they study.

Our school is currently on a block schedule, which provides four classes per week: one anchor class of 45 minutes on Monday, and two classes of 90 minutes on alternate days. This is a perfect schedule for the AP French Literature course. Students have two days to prepare their reading, and lesson plans can include group activities, oral presentations, or movies.

The AP French Literature course presents two major challenges: the extent and difficulty of the reading list, and the students' lack of previous cultural and historical knowledge. Most students need some cultural and historical orientation to appreciate the literary works they study in the course.

Required Readings

Novels

Duras, *Moderato cantabile*

Maupassant, *Pierre et Jean*

Voltaire, *Candide*

Plays

Césaire, *Une tempête*

Corneille, *Le Cid*

Molière, *L'école des femmes*

Poetry

Apollinaire: "Le pont Mirabeau," "Les colchiques," "Mai," "Automne"

Baudelaire: "Correspondances," "Hymne à la beauté," "L'invitation au voyage," "Chant d'automne," "Spleen" ("Quand le ciel..."), "Recueillement" (From *Les fleurs du mal*)

Du Bellay: “Heureux qui comme Ulysse a fait un beau voyage,” “Si notre vie est moins qu’une journée”

Labé: “On voit mourir toute chose animée,” “Je vis, je meurs: je me brûle et me noie”

La Fontaine: “Les animaux malades de la peste,” “Le chêne et le roseau,” “La mort et le bûcheron,” “Le loup et l’agneau”

Reading Strategies

Prereading Activities

Typically, before starting to study any author, we have an orientation on that author and the century in question. (Sometimes students taking European History are also in the class, and they impress their classmates with their knowledge.) I often give students two or three good Web sites for the new authors and ask them to come to class prepared to discuss what they have discovered in those Web sites. For instance, after their Internet quest on Maupassant, I will ask each group of students to brainstorm in French and come up with biographical details in Maupassant’s life that might relate to the novel *Pierre et Jean*. Students will easily see that Maupassant was crazy about sailing and the ocean, and that is the setting for the novel. After the students have explored the appropriate Web sites, I give them a concise handout about the author’s life and time. Sometimes, I will use portions of a movie to prepare for the reading. For the seventeenth-century, for instance, the students can watch *The Rise and Fall of Louis XIV* by Rossellini, or the excellent Moutchine series on Molière.

The movies lead to creative writing or oral activities. Students are generally totally ignorant of “*La Préciosité*”, which they need to understand to fully appreciate “L’Ecole des femmes” The *Précieuses*’ gathering in the movie *Cyrano de Bergerac*, as well as the study of the character of Roxanne, will help them understand that seventeenth-century literary and social movement. Later, students may try to emulate the *Précieuses* and invent comical impromptus. They also can explore an interactive “Carte du Tendre” put up by the French Embassy in Ottawa to illustrate a lecture on *La Préciosité*.

Reading Texts

The reading list is such that, generally, three weeks and no more are dedicated to the study of one author. I used to follow a chronological order, starting with the Renaissance and finishing with the modern times. At the suggestion of my students, we now start with the most accessible works and alternate the genres, which requires forsaking the chronological order. Generally, I will assign the reading of *Pierre et Jean* during the summer. Then we read some poetry, generally Baudelaire. Students seem to enjoy the variety and frequent changes of genres, since some of them are a bit intimidated by poetry. Some texts require more teacher guidance than others. Poetry and the classical theater necessitate a lot of classwork to keep students’ frustration to a minimum. [C1]

C1—The course is structured to allow students to complete the entire AP French Literature reading list in text form.

1. **The Plays**—*L'Ecole des Femmes*, *Le Cid*, and *Une Tempête*.

We read the whole first act together in class, and proceed slowly, working with worksheets and vocabulary lists that I generate. Sometimes I ask students to read aloud for pronunciation practice, but they confess that they lose track of the meaning when doing so. We also use professional recordings (*Le Cid*/Gérard Philippe) or videos from the *Comédie Française* for *L'Ecole des femmes*. Students often work in groups of four on a set of questions and summarize their discussion on a piece of newsprint paper that we post around the room and review together. Obviously, all these activities are conducted exclusively in French. [C2]

C2—The teacher uses French almost exclusively in class and encourages students to do likewise.

Once I have ascertained that the majority of the students understand the text, the reading and worksheets are done as homework. In class, we read significant passages, or watch videos of certain scenes. Most frequently, students discuss themes, character development, and literary processes. [C3] Taking advantage of our longer classes of 90 minutes twice a week, students often work in groups, which reduces their fear of “not knowing” or “giving the wrong answer.” Assessment is done through tests/essays written in class and creative writing done each week at home. Occasionally, I substitute oral presentations for written essays.

C3—The course teaches students the techniques of literary analysis.

2. **The Novels**

The same strategy applies to the novels. Students enjoy doing research on the Web and the sociological and historical background it provides. Early on in the class, it is very important to model good techniques of literary analysis and interpretation with the students. Before doing on their own an *analyse de texte* that will be graded, students work in groups on an AP *analyse dirigée*. [C5] For instance, when reading Maupassant, I give the whole class the “Déjeuner” passage and, in groups of four, students analyze the passage and list, for instance, all the feelings going through the main character, Pierre, and most importantly, how the author reveals his character’s feelings. Each group presents its findings to the class and if important details are forgotten, I intervene. After a few sessions, students feel much more confident to tackle an *analyse dirigée* on their own. [C5] Again, all these discussions among the students and reporting to the larger group are conducted in French. I list a lot of vocabulary related to literary terminology on the board, and students take notes. [C4] At the beginning of the school year, I let them use their notes when writing a timed essay in class. This motivates everyone to take good notes.

C5—The course includes close reading and extensive discussion of texts, with particular attention to character, theme, structure, and style, and to how these elements are related to overall interpretation.

C4—The course teaches students a basic vocabulary of critical terms.

3. The Poems

Again, we proceed slowly at first, modeling in class the technique of the *explication de text*. Before talking *métaphore* and *rejet* I sometimes create a simple exercise for a given poem: I delete key words from the poem and ask students to fill in the missing words. They work in groups and, taking turns, read their completed poem to the class, justifying their choice of words. Then the class reads the “authentic” text and comments on the differences. If the poem in question is “*Le Dormeur du val*,” for instance, the students can appreciate that “*chante*” *une rivière* brings more to the text than “*coule*” *une rivière*, which is what most of them chose to insert. This activity leads easily to a discussion of poetry terminology and serves as an introduction to the *analyse de texte*. [C5]

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After doing several *explications de texte*, students are put in charge of their own oral *explication de texte*. Since our AP French Literature class is fairly large, students do their presentations in pairs. They often use other talents, such as music or painting, to personalize their understanding of their assigned poem. After each pair’s presentation to the class, I clarify some points and answer further questions. These frequent oral class activities balance the writing done in and out of the classroom and stress the importance of oral proficiency. I grade these oral presentations with rubrics that I have shared with and explained in detail to the class. [C6]

C6—Class discussion and essay writing in French are essential components of the course.

Writing Activities

Analytical and Creative Writing

While class time is spent mostly on oral activities done in French, a great deal of writing takes place in AP French Literature, of course. All in-class quizzes and tests take the form of essay questions that students must answer without the use of a dictionary. Often, I let students use their texts for analytical questions. Outside the classroom, they write frequent logs and longer essays. I try to guide them with their essay topics. Sometimes, I select the subject and other times the students themselves come up with several topics and decide which one to develop. [C6]

Grammar

The most challenging aspect of the AP French Literature class is probably improving the quality of the oral and written expression of all the students. Oral proficiency is not the main focus of this course, but students improve their listening comprehension and their speaking skills by participating regularly in oral activities and discussions.

The writing process requires constant feedback. Some students are aware of their deficiencies in some language areas and wish for more “grammar work,” which is not feasible considering the time constraints of the program. I try to give individual feedback to each student by establishing a dialogue about his or her syntax mistakes through an analysis sheet for each writing piece done in or out of class. This involves at least two rounds of exchanges between teacher and student.

Initially, I just circle the grammatical errors, make comments on the content, and return the paper to the student. The student then edits his or her essay and resubmits it for a final grade. At this time I make syntax corrections if it is still necessary. Students later write an analysis of their syntax errors, which I check for a small grade. All of the writing is kept in individual portfolios. When I polled my students, most said that this method helped them, although some indicated frustration at the slowness of their improvement.

We are also investigating the usefulness of some word processing programs to help students improve the syntactic quality of their writing and also alleviate the burden of so many exchanges of papers for the teacher. However, we have mixed results, Le Patron being the best software we have found but still very cumbersome to use.

Most of the assigned topics for logs and in-class timed writing relate to literary analysis to develop students' skills at interpreting a literary passage. I find that assigning now and then a more "creative" writing topic provides a needed change of pace for the students. They get a bit tired of searching for three images and analyzing their symbolic value in all the poems! [C6] Sometimes students come up with their own topics. I have a list of favorites, for instance, "You are a character from *Pierre et Jean*, the Maupassant novel. Write to the author to complain about the way he portrayed you in his novel." It is good to have one of these creative topics to assign for each author from the reading list.

C6—Class discussion and essay writing in French are essential components of the course.

Motivating Students

We work very hard in this course to finish the reading list and to make sure everyone is prepared to answer any question on any author. [C1] However, in my opinion, the main goal of the class is to infuse students with a lifelong enthusiasm for reading and thinking about what one read, in French as well as in English. It is a demanding class, requiring relentless concentration from the students: I think it is imperative to sprinkle "creative" activities to keep the class from becoming too intense. For instance, after presenting many of La Fontaine's *Fables*, students enjoy an improvised speaking charades game, with each small group of students improvising a modern moral tale and the rest of the class guessing which fable it matched.

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For *L'invitation au voyage* by Baudelaire, each student came up with an object that symbolized their idyllic place. They all enjoyed the show-and-tell activity and were ready to go back to serious work soon after.

One sure way to hook students is to challenge them with the modernity of many of the themes encountered in the readings. *Candide* has all the components of a modern bestseller—sex, violence, and much more, of course. Louise Labé, especially in the sonnet "*Que me sert que si parfaitement...*" is very close to the angry young women singers so popular nowadays.... The AP French Literature class prepares students to succeed on the AP French Literature Exam and guides them through a long list of masterpieces. But, hopefully, it inspires in most of them a sincere love of French culture and French literature.

After the AP French Literature Exam

What to do with the seniors after the AP Exam? Each year, we face this challenge. The choice of activities reflects the personality of each class. One thing is sure—no more essay writing! Movies, dramatizations, and creating and playing “literary” games are always popular. Since our students are very computer savvy, I often devise a technology-oriented project for the last weeks of the course. For instance, some students, working alone or in pairs, can create a Web homepage for the authors studied during the year; others can scan pictures to illustrate some of their favorite poems and make a PowerPoint presentation to the class. Songs related to the topics studied are also always popular, especially if they come with a clip.