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**Abstract:** This article chronicles the early life and writing career of Voltaire, famous for his wit and flamboyance, who was a prominent figure of the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment in Europe. Known for his advocacy of freedom of religion and other civil liberties, Voltaire is widely admired as one of the greatest authors in French literature. Already interested in intellectual pursuits, Voltaire excelled in his courses at Le College Louis-le-Grand, the Jesuit school he attended until the age of sixteen. Voltaire, now twenty years old, began writing full time. One of Voltaire's earliest writings brought him a great deal of attention. The document, a satire on the private life and supposedly criminal deeds of Philippe II, duc d'Orléans, was viewed as treason. Voltaire was imprisoned at Paris' Bastille for nearly a full year as a result. (Copyright applies to all Abstracts)

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## Voltaire

### [Background and Early Writing](#)

Voltaire, famous for his wit and flamboyance, was a prominent figure of the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment in Europe. A playwright, poet, novelist, essayist and philosopher, he produced a large body of work during his long life, including the famous satirical novel "Candide." His philosophical writings provided the basis for the work of later French philosophers, including Jean-Paul Sartre. Known for his advocacy of freedom of religion and other civil liberties, Voltaire is widely admired as one of the greatest authors in French literature.

Voltaire was born François Maire Arouet on November 21, 1694, in Paris, France. His parents, François Arouet and Marie Marguerite Daumond, were members of the French nobility. The family also included Voltaire's older brother, Armand, and his younger sister, Marie.

His mother died when Voltaire was only seven years old, and he inherited a large amount of money. Because of the tragic loss of his mother, Voltaire was not sent to school as

early as most children of French nobility. Instead, his godfather, the Abbé de Châteauneuf, taught Voltaire to read and write.

Already interested in intellectual pursuits, Voltaire excelled in his courses at Le College Louis-le-Grand, the Jesuit school he attended until the age of sixteen. Though he began writing poems, plays and satires during his time as a student, his father insisted that Voltaire pursue a career in law. When Voltaire refused, his father sent him to work as secretary for his friend, the Marquis de Châteauneuf.

Having relocated to The Hague, Voltaire disliked his new job. He socialized with a group of French Huguenots who had moved out of France. One refugee with whom he spent much of his time was Mademoiselle Du Noyer. Voltaire fell in love with Du Noyer's daughter Olympe, also known as "Pimpette."

Du Noyer was aware that Voltaire was notorious for immoral behavior and numerous sexual affairs. She was also aware of his claim that the virtue of virginity in young women was a "superstition," and arranged for Voltaire to be sent back to Paris. Pimpette, desperate to marry, followed Voltaire's instructions to escape The Hague dressed as a man so that the couple could elope. Their plan was thwarted, however, and Voltaire never saw Pimpette again.

Voltaire, now twenty years old, began writing full time. His father arranged a series of other secretarial jobs for him in Paris, at which Voltaire intentionally failed. At the same time, he had relationships with several women, including Adrienne Lecouvreur, the most famous actress of the time.

One of Voltaire's earliest writings brought him a great deal of attention. The document, a satire on the private life and supposedly criminal deeds of Philippe II, duc d'Orléans, was viewed as treason. Voltaire was imprisoned at Paris' Bastille for nearly a full year as a result.

### Imprisonment and Exile

In 1718, the young writer created his pen name. The origin of the name "Voltaire" is unknown, but is believed to be a pun on the French phrasing of "the younger Arouet."

During his time in the Bastille, Voltaire wrote several works, including a tragic drama titled "Œdipe" (1718). Based on Sophocles' ancient tragedy "Œdipus Rex," Voltaire's play was an enormous success. At this point, he was established as a successful and famous writer.

Another of Voltaire's works written in the Bastille proved to be one of his most controversial. Originally titled "Poème de la ligue" and later revised as "La Henriade," the epic poem focuses on the monarchy of England's King Henry IV. The poem was initially banned by the Catholic-dominated French government, because it praised elements of Protestant England's society and government.

After he was released from the Bastille, Voltaire wrote "Le pour et le contre," an anti-Christian poem that promotes deism, a form of worship that does not require adherence to organized religion. The poem was Voltaire's earliest philosophical work.

Though he had become famous in literary circles and was popular among the upper class, many became disdainful of Voltaire's fame, politics and religious views. After a feud with the Chevalier de Rohan in 1726, Voltaire was sentenced once again to the Bastille. When given the choice of staying in the Bastille or being sent into exile, Voltaire chose exile.

From 1726 to 1729, he lived in Bolingbroke, England. While there, Voltaire became interested in English politics and philosophy, and met several prominent English writers. Voltaire was delighted when Alexander Pope admitted him into his elite society of writers and philosophers.

In 1728, the ban on "La Henriade" was lifted and the poem was finally published. It was accepted with praise throughout Europe. When he returned to France, Voltaire published a tragedy, "Brutus," (1730), a historical essay titled "History of Charles XII" (1731), and "Zaire" (1732), one of his best-known plays. When he saw another of his works, "Letters Concerning the English Nation" (1733) banned by the French government, Voltaire left Paris once again.

This time, Voltaire's search for a new home ended in Lorraine, France. He moved into Cirey, the estate of Gabrielle Émilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, Marquise du Châtelet. Voltaire and Émilie soon became lovers, and he published a large amount of plays, essays, and poems during his time in her home.

Voltaire's work from the period at Cirey include the poem "Discours sur l'homme" (1738); "Elements of the Philosophy of Newton" (1738) and other essays on the work of Sir Isaac Newton; plays such as "Alzire" (1736), "Mahomet" (1741), "Mérope" (1743), and "La princesse de Navarre" (1745); a poem based on a battle in the War of Austrian Succession titled "Poème de Fontenoy" (1745); and the romantic tale "Zadig" (1747).

### **"Candide" and Later Years**

Voltaire continued to travel while living at Cirey. He frequently visited Versailles, where he became acquainted with Louis XV and his mistress, the Marquise de Pompadour. His relationships with the king and his mistress led to several important events in Voltaire's career. He was named official historiographer of France, and in 1746, he was made a member of the elite Académie Française. At this time, he began writing "Précis du siècle de Louis XV" (1768), a companion to his historical work "Le Siècle de Louis XIV" (1751).

Though Voltaire never married, Émilie was his closest companion. In 1749, she discovered she was pregnant. Several days after giving birth, Émilie died of a fever, while another of her lovers believed himself to be the father of her child.

After Émilie's death, Voltaire became an attendant in the court of Frederick II of Prussia. Voltaire moved to the court in Berlin, in modern Germany. He eventually realized that he did not get along with Frederick. Though he referred to the ruler as the "Philosopher King," Voltaire thought he was tyrannical, and moved to Switzerland in 1750.

Voltaire lived in Switzerland for several years, during which he wrote "The Lisbon Disaster" (1755), based on a large earthquake in Lisbon, Portugal, and "Poem on Natural Law" (1756). In his controversial "Essay on General History and on the Customs and the Character of Nations" (1756), Voltaire loudly denounces religion, which he states is used by governments to persecute the lower class. In his political works, Voltaire often voiced his motto, "écrasez l'infâme," or "crush the evil thing."

In 1759, Voltaire bought the Ferney estate on the border between France and Switzerland, where he established his permanent residence. At Ferney, Voltaire completed "Candide" (1759), the most famous of all his works. The short novel, which follows the exploits of its naive title character, derives from Voltaire's interest in philosophy and

human nature. A political satire, the novel challenges the popular notion that we live in "the best of all possible worlds."

Other works completed while at Ferney include "Essays on the Manners and Spirit of Nations" (1759-1766), a tragedy titled "Tancrède" (1760), and the "Dictionnaire philosophique" (1764).

In the last year of his life, Voltaire's final play was staged in Paris. Titled "Irène," it was yet another acclaimed drama. Voltaire died in Paris on May 30, 1778, at the age of 83. His body, denied burial on church grounds by the Roman Catholic Church, is interred at the Panthéon in Paris.

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By Richard Means

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**Source:** Voltaire