

**General Information and Reading Lists for Students of French  
2026**

I'm the Tutor for French at Somerville and together with my colleagues Dr Ashwiny Kistnareddy and Dr Amina Zarzi, we're looking forward to welcoming you to the college. I'm writing to you now to prepare you for studying at Oxford by giving you information about what to expect on arrival, and some advice on what reading you will need to do before the course begins. I have enclosed with this letter a brief outline of the first-year course. You will need to read it carefully and keep it for reference, as it sets out the shape of the course and highlights the set texts that you are required to study in depth.

I also include a list of recommended texts required for the course that you should acquire before the course begins. In French literature, you will be working towards Paper III in the first term, so it is most important that you get hold of the texts for these papers in the recommended editions and read them thoroughly before the start of term. Don't worry if it seems a slow process to begin with; you'll soon find yourself reading texts with more fluency. You will also find it useful to revise your knowledge of French grammar, and to try to develop that knowledge beyond A-level standard before you arrive in Oxford. In particular, if you are not familiar with the *passé simple* tense ('je fus, tu fus, il fut...'), now is the time to do some independent research on it and master its regular and as many of its irregular forms as you can.

I hope that you are looking forward to continuing your study of French. Should you have a query about any aspect of the course at Oxford, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me. My email address is [simon.kemp@some.ox.ac.uk](mailto:simon.kemp@some.ox.ac.uk).

I'll be very pleased to hear from you.

Best wishes, and looking forward to seeing you soon,



Simon Kemp  
Associate Professor of French, Somerville College

## THE FIRST YEAR (PRELIMS COURSE)

The first year of the French course is designed to effect a transition from the kind of work that you have done at school to the more demanding work that you will be expected to do when preparing for the Honour School in your second year. You will be encouraged to consolidate and improve your written and spoken language skills, and you will be introduced to some techniques of literary study. The examinations are taken at the end of Trinity Term in the summer, and consists of four written papers and an oral component.

### Language

The French language textbooks that underpin the first year course are **R. Hawkins and R. Towell, *French Grammar and Usage***, and the accompanying book of grammar exercises, ***Practising French Grammar***. In order to increase your vocabulary, you are also expected to work through **J. A. Duffy, *Using French Vocabulary***. It is arranged in three levels: level 1 represents a good minimum level of attainment by the end of the first year. I suggest that, if you can, you familiarize yourself with these books now, before you come to Oxford.

#### **Paper I            French Language**

This paper is divided into three parts. You will be asked to translate ten sentences exemplifying common points of grammar, to translate a short passage into French, and to summarize a passage of French critical writing in French.

#### **Paper II            Translation**

This paper is in two parts. Part 1 asks you to translate into English a French prose passage. Part 2 requires you to translate into English a passage from one of the three novels prescribed for Paper IV (i.e. from either Condé, Sand, or Laclos).

#### **Oral**

There will also be an oral component to Prelims, requiring regular attendance at oral classes.

### Literature

Most students begin the course without having made much, if any, formal study of French literature. Both the literature papers that you will cover in the first year require you to undertake a close reading in the original French of a range of literary texts selected from different periods, genres and parts of the French-speaking world so that you will gradually build up your reading speed, and learn how to approach French literary texts and how to write critical commentaries and essays. The course is designed to provide a grounding for the literary study that you will do in the second year and beyond. **It is important that you read these texts thoroughly before the term in which they are studied.**

#### **Paper III            Short Texts**

This course will introduce you to the technique of close reading through the study of four short works:

### **Michaelmas Term (October-December)**

**Weeks 1-2: Introduction to literary analysis**

**Weeks 3-4: Montaigne, 'Des cannibales'**

**Weeks 5-6: Racine, *Phèdre***

**Weeks 7-8: Verlaine, *Romances sans paroles***

### **Hilary Term (January-March)**

**Weeks 1-2: Marie NDiaye, *Papa doit manger***

We will be writing critical commentaries on extracts taken from these texts. You will need to show that you know the texts well by establishing the context of the passages, but the skill is to show that you can comment in an interesting and informed way on the particular piece of French in front of you, on its language and ideas. When commenting on texts written in verse, you are required to show an understanding of the author's use of versification.

(Note to students of the **European and Middle-Eastern Languages** joint school: due to the workload involved in learning the middle-eastern language at this point in the course, EMEL students do **not** have to submit work for Paper III, but are encouraged to attend and participate in the seminars for it.)

### **Paper IV          Narrative Fiction**

This paper introduces you to four longer narratives, including medieval, early-modern and more recent writing from France and the French-speaking world.

### **Hilary Term**

**Weeks 3-4: *La Chastelaine de Vergy***

**Weeks 5-6: Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses***

**Weeks 7-8: Sand, *Indiana***

### **Trinity Term (April-June)**

**Weeks 1-2: Condé, *Traversée de la mangrove***

This paper is examined by essay. You are offered a choice of two essay questions on each text, and you are required to answer three questions, each on a different text. You will need to show that you can analyse the implications of the question set and construct a clear, relevant and interesting argument, supported at every stage by detailed knowledge of the text.

You'll be attending lectures at the Modern Languages Faculty through the first year on each of the set texts, as well as on reading Old French and understanding versification. In college, you'll have two seminars with the whole year-group on each of the texts, followed by a tutorial in a smaller group, in which we'll discuss an essay or commentary you'll have written. You'll be expected to write one substantial commentary or essay on each text, as well as completing a number of pieces of language work and preparing actively for classes and tutorials. The terms are only eight weeks long, and very intensive, which is why it's important to get as much preparation done as possible in the vacations beforehand.

## ACQUIRING YOUR SET TEXTS

Set texts are available for purchase online via Amazon or alternative sites such as *chapitre.com*, *abebooks.co.uk*, or *blackwells.co.uk*. Buying second-hand copies is a good way to reduce expense, and copies are available from the university libraries. Do please try to get the recommended editions where possible, as listed below.

### For language study:

- A good monolingual French dictionary, such as **Le Petit Robert** or **Larousse** (Smartphone app versions of the dictionaries are often cheaper and more practical than book form.)
- A French-English/English-French dictionary, such as **Collins-Robert** or the **Larousse** (both available as an app).
- Key French grammar for the first year course – **R. Hawkins and R. Towell, *French Grammar and Usage (Arnold)***, and the grammar workbook to accompany this text - **R. Hawkins, M.-N. Lamy and R. Towell, *Practising French Grammar***.
- Key vocabulary book for the first year course – **J. Duffy, *Using French Vocabulary (Cambridge University Press)***.
- **Glanville Price, *A Comprehensive French Grammar*** (Blackwell). This reference book will be required for language work from your second year onwards, but may be worth getting now.

### Literature set texts:

#### **Michel de Montaigne, 'Des cannibales', (*Essais* I, 30)**

Recommended student edition: Montaigne, *Essais: 'Des cannibales' et 'Des coches'*, ed. by M. Tarpinian (Ellipses).

#### **Jean Racine, *Phèdre***

Recommended student edition: Racine, *Phèdre*, ed. by R. Picard (Folio Classique). (The Bristol Classical Press edition edited by R. Parish also has a very helpful English-language introduction and notes, but is more expensive. Copies are available in the libraries here.)

Racine, *Phèdre*, ed. by R. Parish (Bristol Classical Press)

#### **Paul Verlaine, *Romances sans paroles***

Recommended student edition: *Romances sans paroles*, ed. by A. Bernadet (GF-Flammarion)

#### **Marie NDiaye, *Papa doit manger***

Recommended student edition: Marie NDiaye, *Papa doit manger* (Minuit)

#### **Anonymous, *La Chastelaine de Vergy***

Recommended student edition: *La Chastelaine de Vergy*, ed. by J. Dufournet and Liliane Dulac (Folio classique).

#### **Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses***

Recommended student edition: Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, ed. by R. Pomeau (Flammarion)

#### **George Sand, *Indiana***

Recommended student edition: Sand, *Indiana*, ed. by Béatrice Didier (Folio)

#### **Maryse Condé, *Traversée de la Mangrove***

Recommended student edition: Condé, *Traversée de la mangrove* (Folio)

I wish you all the best for the summer. Please do get in touch at [simon.kemp@some.ox.ac.uk](mailto:simon.kemp@some.ox.ac.uk) if you'd like to ask about anything. Otherwise, I'll see you in October.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR THE SINGLE HONOURS FRENCH COURSE

The following information is **ONLY** for students taking the French 'Single Honours' degree (i.e., **NOT** for those of you who are taking French with another language (French and Spanish, etc.) or with another subject (French and History, etc.). If you are doing French Single Honours, in addition to the above papers you also take three further papers.

### PAPER XI Introduction to French Film Studies

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This paper will introduce you to four twentieth- and twenty-first century film directors. In your essay writing you will be able to engage with their ideas and with their particular way of realising them. The prescribed films are:

- Jean-Luc Godard: *Pierrot le fou* (1965)
- Maurice Pialat: *À nos amours* (1983)
- Claire Denis: *Beau travail* (1999)
- Céline Sciamma: *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019)

#### Course outline:

This paper aims to equip students with basic skills in film analysis. It is taught in two parts in Michaelmas Term.

The first part is a methodological one, consisting of four lectures devoted to four international films in Weeks 1-4. It presents the basic concepts of film analysis: montage, story, self-reference, and spectatorship. These international films are used simply as illustrations for the lectures and are not treated as set texts for examination purposes. The films are: Sergei Eisenstein: *Potemkin* (1925); Alfred Hitchcock: *39 Steps* (1935); Michaelangelo Antonioni (1967): *Blow-up*; Claire Denis: *Beau Travail* (1999).

The second part is a study of the four prescribed French films above, which illustrate these concepts in the context of French history and society. This part of the course is taught in seminars in Weeks 2, 4, 6, and 8; there are no lectures within the language-specific part of the course. Students are encouraged to develop their skills in scene analysis through seminar discussion. You will be required to submit to your seminar tutor an essay on three of the films, and to do a seminar presentation on the fourth. This course is examined by certification at the end of term. Your tutor will be submitting your last essay (which will either be the essay on Céline Sciamma, or, if you are doing an oral presentation on Sciamma, the essay on Claire Denis) to the examiners.

### PAPER XII - Introduction to French Literary Theory

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This paper will introduce you to four twentieth-century literary critics. In your essay writing you will be able to engage with their ideas about literature and with their particular way of expressing them. You will be encouraged to apply these ideas to your own reading of texts.

The prescribed texts are:

- **Valéry**, 'Questions de poésie' and 'Poésie et pensée abstraite', in *Théorie poétique et esthétique*, part of *Variété: Œuvres*, vol. I (Gallimard, 'Pléiade') [both essays are available electronically on Canvas]
- **Sartre**, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Gallimard, 'Folio') [Sections I and II only]
- **Barthes**, *Critique et vérité* (Seuil)
- **Cixous**, 'Le rire de la Méduse' in *Le rire de la Méduse et autres ironies*, ed. by Frédéric Regard (Paris: Galilée, 2010).

The teaching for this paper takes place in Hilary Term weeks 5-8 and Trinity Term weeks 1-4 in a combination of lectures and seminars. You will be required to submit to your seminar tutor an essay on three of the authors, and to do a seminar presentation on the fourth. This course is examined by 3-hour in-person examination; three essays on a choice of two questions on each text.

#### Paper XIII - Key Texts in French Thought

This paper will introduce you to four thinkers from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. In both essay and commentary writing you will be able to engage with their ideas and with their particular way of expressing them.

The prescribed texts are:

- **Descartes**, *Discours de la méthode*, edited by Laurence Renault (Garnier-Flammarion)
- **Rousseau**, *Discours sur l'inégalité* (Gallimard, 'Folio')
- **Beauvoir**, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Gallimard, 'Folio'), I, 'Introduction'; 'Mythes'; II, 'La femme mariée'; 'La mère'.
- **Fanon**, 'Introduction', 'Le Noir et le langage', and 'Conclusion', in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Points 'Essais').

The teaching for this paper takes place in Michaelmas Term weeks 5-8 and Hilary Term weeks 1-4 in a combination of lectures and seminars. You will be required to submit to your seminar tutor an essay or commentary on three of the authors, and to do a seminar presentation on the fourth. Written work should include at least one essay and at least one commentary. The three-hour in-person examination in Trinity Term has one commentary and one essay question on each text. You will answer three questions, each on a different text: one commentary, and two essays. There will be a choice of one commentary passage from each text and one essay question on each text.

