



ST EDMUND HALL  
OXFORD  
OX1 4AR

Telephone (Switchboard): 01865 279000  
Telephone (College Office): 01865 279008  
Fax (College Office): 01865 279002

### To all Incoming First Years reading French in 2025-26:

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. What we offer here is a general outline of the Preliminary French course, together with some reading and a further task to do before you arrive in Oxford.

The first year 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 have extra French papers that are not addressed here.*

**You'll see that we suggest buying (and starting to read) some of the books you will need in advance of arrival. 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 of £100 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 very helpful if you could **start to develop the habit of working at French grammar exercises yourselves before you begin the course.** For this, you might find 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 of course also a number of online resources available, eg through the LEXILOGOS gateway. The best dictionary on this gateway is, we think: Larousse: [https://www.lexilogos.com/english/french\\_dictionary.htm](https://www.lexilogos.com/english/french_dictionary.htm)

A great monolingual dictionary is the following: <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/>, and we often play around with this for/in translation seminars.

We recognise the emergence of **AI technologies** from ChatGPT to a range of LLMs. We look forward to discussing with you your previous experience of using ChatGPT and similar

technologies, such as DeepL Translate, if any. Together we'll explore the role AI might 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 write about your response to them in English. This 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, by learning how to write 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 would be helpful to have read all of the works to be explored in the first term (Michaelmas Term) **before** you arrive in Oxford. 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 if 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. 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.

We would like you to do **some creative translation work before you arrive; we will explore your different versions during the first week**. Please translate the first two pages of *Papa doit manger*, from the opening down to 'Tout est injuste'. As you do so, think about style, age, voice, and rhythm. It might help (since it is a play) to say both the French and your English out loud as you craft your version of the opening moves of the play.

If you have any questions about any of this, 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 (CANVAS) where there is a good deal more information: <https://www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk/> and <https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/37757>

Bonne lecture! And bon courage!

Yours,



Wes Williams  
Professor of French Literature,  
Fellow and Tutor in Modern Languages,  
St Edmund Hall, Oxford, OX1 4AR