

# The Age of Enlightenment

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.13.17

Word Count **505**

Level **610L**



A lecture about the solar system, with a lamp in place of the sun. Image from the public domain.

Europe went through big changes 300 years ago. This new age was called the Enlightenment.

Thinkers in the Enlightenment believed in the power of reason. When people use reason it means they are thinking for themselves. It also means they believe something only when there is proof.

The Enlightenment was important for art, science and even war. The American Revolution was inspired by Enlightenment ideas. People in North America were ruled by Britain at the time. They wanted to rule themselves. So, they fought back and created the United States of America.

## **The early Enlightenment: 1685-1730**

Many great thinkers were part of the Enlightenment. They did not all have the same ideas, but they shared some important beliefs.

One belief was that all people should think for themselves. It didn't matter if a king or a priest was giving orders. People should not follow them without thinking.

Enlightenment thinkers also believed that ideas should be shared. By talking to each other, people can learn and grow. They thought that this was the only way to become wiser.

Before the Enlightenment, some important thinkers in the 1500s and early 1600s made famous discoveries. These discoveries made the Enlightenment possible. Science had become very important. Many new discoveries were made about nature and the world. Galileo Galilei and Johannes Kepler were famous scientists right before the Enlightenment. They made important discoveries in the study of stars and planets.

Then, the Enlightenment really got going in England in the 1680s. One important British thinker was John Locke. He said that knowledge is learned through experience. Truth doesn't sit inside the mind. It can only be found by looking at how the world is. Isaac Newton from England created new types of math.



### **The High Enlightenment: 1730-1780**

Enlightenment thinkers believed that everything could be explained. A group of authors set out to explain everything they knew. Denis Diderot gathered their knowledge into one of the first encyclopedias. This book talked about everything, from shoemaking to advanced science.

### **The late Enlightenment and beyond: 1780-1815**

A very important moment in the Enlightenment was the French Revolution. People in France thought that priests and nobles had too much power. So they fought to take them down.

The leaders of the Revolution wanted to throw out old rules. They tried to change France by following reason. But the Revolution caused many deaths. This showed that Enlightenment ideas weren't perfect.

But, the Enlightenment helped spread the idea of equality. This means that people should all have the same rights. This inspired people like the writer Mary Wollstonecraft. She argued that men and women should be equal. At the time, not many people spoke out like she did.

