
DRAMATIC MOMENT

In 1751, the first volume of the French *Encyclopedie* appeared in Paris. Its editor, a young writer named Denis Diderot, founded this project on the idea that people were not stuck with their lot in life, but could take charge and improve their existence by replacing blind faith in authority with their own ability to reason. This idea was at the core of 18th-century Enlightenment thinking. Diderot gathered over 200 experts to contribute articles in every field for his ambitious enterprise. The purpose of the encyclopedia was to make available to people the sum total of technical, scientific, and philosophical knowledge known to mankind at that time.

These books included new classification systems of animals, explanations of surgical procedures, tactics of war, and diagrams of machinery and weaponry that before had been understood only by those directly involved in the specific professions. It also included trade secrets known only to the guilds in times past. Now with the encyclopedia, the knowledge was made public for anyone who could read to use.

The *Encyclopedie* was exciting to the thinking people of Paris, because it gave them free access to a wealth of knowledge, in a way which bypassed traditional authority. People could purchase and read these books, and think about the ideas they contained, in the privacy of their own homes. In the past, both the government and the Church had controlled what information people had. In the new encyclopedia however, the King and the Church only appeared as subjects of articles. They were presented as no more important than any other topic, for Diderot had organized all the subjects in an impartial, alphabetical order. This was revolutionary and disrespectful! No wonder the authorities were worried!

Undaunted, the determined editor Diderot issued the second volume towards the end of the year. The first volume had contained controversial articles on religion. The next volume had an entry written by a young churchman, which was violently condemned by the Church. The churchman was forced to flee the country for his life. Diderot had gone too far! The government was now angry, and the King revoked permission to publish any further volumes. Its young editor went into hiding, but vowed to continue his work.