
French @ Newcastle

School of Modern Languages

2025-26 · Edited by Dr Damien Hall



Welcome!

Dr Damien Hall, Head of French and Senior Lecturer in French Linguistics

Welcome to this year's edition of the French Newsletter from the School of Modern Languages at Newcastle University. In these pages you'll find a selection of articles that introduce you to some of the things we do in French here:

- opportunities available to students
- discoveries they've made through their studies
- Year Abroad experiences
- some of the fascinating research done by lecturers in French here



Damien Hall

Thanks for coming to Newcastle—we hope you enjoy it and find it useful. If you've any questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch: damien.hall@newcastle.ac.uk.



*A degree in
Modern
Languages at
Newcastle can
really take you
places!*



Social Justice in French and Francophone Cultures

Dr Sarah Leahy, Reader in French and Film

Why was France so much slower to respond to the #MeToo campaign than the US or the UK? How does Republican universalism intersect with ideas of social justice? What threads continue to bind France and Belgium and former colonies, and how do they entwine with postcolonial violence or migration? How can young people from the disadvantaged banlieue navigate French institutions that seem designed to exclude them? Can a work of art help to bring about justice?



Sarah Leahy

These are a few of the questions we've been exploring in a new module for final-year students of French where we explore aspects of social justice and injustices in the French and Francophone world.

The module is taught by a team with a wide range of expertise across geographical and historical contexts as well as different conceptual approaches. This past year, we've covered the French response to #MeToo in literature and the audiovisual industry, explored ideas of spatial justice and 'Le Droit à la ville', questioned the impact of France's institutional colour-blindness on migration, race and social class, and looked at postcolonial narratives of injustice in relation to the legacies of French and Belgian colonial occupation in Algeria and the African Great Lakes region. In doing so, we've encountered forms of expression from street protests to personal memoirs, mass participation events to legal processes and examined stories and images presented across a range of media from literature, film and TV to street art, music and *bande dessinée*. Come and chat, or write to us, if you'd like to know more!



Some of the culture we look at in our Social Justice module

Sarah in Paris: your degree beyond the lecture-hall

Sarah McCreery is a final-year student who spent part of her Year Abroad in Paris, and is now writing a dissertation on the Parisian fashion industry

Studying Modern Languages at university is about so much more than vocabulary and grammar. It is about understanding different cultures, thinking differently and stepping outside of your comfort zone. For me, this became clear during my Year Abroad, specifically my 6-month work placement in Paris, which shaped my final-year dissertation.

Most Modern Languages students count down the days until the Year Abroad. Learning about French culture through literature, film and history modules taught me a lot before I got to experience it for myself. Living and working in Paris was one of the most valuable learning experiences for me because I was able to apply everything that I learnt at Newcastle and develop that knowledge.



Sarah (centre) and friends enjoy a picnic on a sunny day

In Paris, I was lucky enough to work in the fashion industry, which was fast-paced and, at times, intimidating (especially in another language). I spent my days doing administrative work, helping in showrooms, communicating with clients and adapting to a remarkably different professional culture. Although my placement was challenging, it was a very transformative time for my degree. Moving to France, I was shy and lacked confidence, but coming back to university, my confidence improved massively – linguistically and personally. I became more independent and resilient, ready to complete my degree at Newcastle University.

Life in Paris was more than I could have imagined. My days weren't just spent working, they were spent exploring the city. Walking along the Seine after work, sitting with friends in the Jardin du Luxembourg, or spending Sunday afternoons wandering through Le Marais, these moments made my French feel lived-in rather than just studied. What really stood out to me was how central fashion is to Parisian identity, it is tied to history, creativity and global influence. Working in Le Sentier, historically known as the heart of Paris's garment district, meant I saw the industry up close, not just the image of luxury fashion, but the everyday reality of production, wholesale and the networks that keep the city's fashion scene moving. Surrounded by showrooms and small ateliers, I could see firsthand, how deeply embedded fashion is in the city's economic and cultural image. It wasn't just something displayed on runways during fashion week.



Paris in the Springtime

My days spent in Le Sentier [*the Parisian fashion district—ed*] inspired my dissertation. When I returned for final year, I knew I wanted to explore fashion in Paris not just as glamour, but also as culture. My work now looks at how fashion contributes to Paris's international image and how areas like Le Sentier have played a role in shaping its reputation as a global fashion capital, helping Paris maintain this title throughout the years.

Looking back, my Year Abroad wasn't just about improving my French, it was about experiencing it. It showed me that a Modern Languages degree is not confined to lecture halls; we get to experience it in workplaces, city streets and real-world challenges. Most importantly, it shaped the direction of my final year and gave me a new, passionate interest that I could also use for my degree!

De bonjour à bravo... Notre parcours en tant qu'étudiantes débutantes en français à l'université de Newcastle

Mary Bryning, Corinne Dart et Georgia Fletcher sont des étudiantes de dernière année en français, qui ont commencé à apprendre le français quand elles sont arrivées à Newcastle. Elles réfléchissent sur leurs expériences, leurs parcours et leurs réussites.

Nous sommes en septembre 2022 et nous assistons à notre tout premier cours de français, ne comprenant rien pour le moment sauf le mot « bonjour » ... Trois ans plus tard, nous avons vécu en France, nous nous sommes plongées dans la culture française, parcouru le pays en bus de nuit et débattu sur la meilleure cuisine, avant de passer nos examens oraux en dernière année d'études à Newcastle en tant que locutrices confiantes et éloquentes.

Le niveau A était soigneusement conçu pour les débutants, combinant des cours structurés de grammaire et de vocabulaire avec de la pratique en petits groupes qui nous ont permis de progresser rapidement sans nous sentir dépassées. Nos nombreuses heures de contact hebdomadaires étaient enrichies par l'enthousiasme de notre professeure, Cécilia, qui nous soutenait en dehors des cours, nous permettant d'atteindre le niveau baccalauréat en seulement quelques mois.

En deuxième année, les cours étaient centrés sur la préparation de l'année à l'étranger : rédaction de CV, préparation aux entretiens, décryptage des annonces de logement et apprentissage du vocabulaire pratique nécessaire pour vivre et travailler dans un environnement francophone. En dehors de la salle de classe, Cécilia et Sandra



Georgia Fletcher, Mary Bryning, Corinne Dart, Rue de l'Université, Paris

partageaient leurs connaissances et expertises afin de nous aider à approfondir notre compréhension linguistique et culturelle du français.

Étudier le français *ab initio* [« dès le début »—NDLR] ensemble, ça voulait dire ne jamais franchir les étapes seules. Ce qui avait commencé par des salutations hésitantes et des rires face à nos erreurs de prononciation s'est rapidement transformé en une amitié qui nous a menées au-delà des frontières.

L'année à l'étranger

Corinne

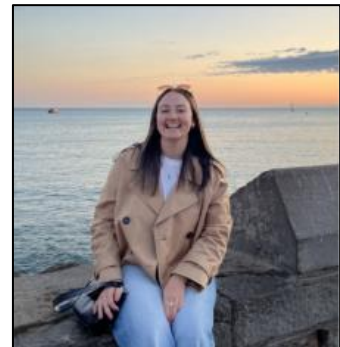


Corinne à côté de la mer à Sanary

J'ai commencé mon année à l'étranger en tant qu'assistante d'anglais dans une école à Sanary-sur-Mer, une ville côtière du sud de la France. Touchée par la gentillesse des habitants, j'ai été accueillie par une famille française qui m'a invitée à partager ses dîners et célébrations. L'été suivant, j'ai poursuivi mon immersion en travaillant dans un musée du vin, où je faisais découvrir aux visiteurs le riche patrimoine viticole de la région. Une expérience inoubliable dont je garderai toujours un souvenir précieux.

Georgia

Pour moi, l'année à l'étranger m'a menée de la conjugaison de *être* et *avoir* à un poste d'enseignante d'anglais à Aix-en-Provence, tout en explorant la France le week-end. Vivre avec une hôtesse française m'a fait découvrir des traditions comme la galette des rois et m'a mise au défi de m'exprimer chaque jour dans un pays que je ne connaissais pas. Discuter avec mes collègues ou commander un pain au chocolat sont devenus des étapes marquantes révélant mes progrès ; voir les jeux de rôle en classe devenir de vraies conversations était presque irréel. Commencer le français *ab initio* m'a permis de construire une vie dans un tout nouveau pays.



Georgia à côté de la mer à Sète



Mary à Toulouse

Mary

Comme Georgia, j'ai enseigné l'anglais à des adultes à Aix-en-Provence, découvrant le monde professionnel français, et même des dégustations de fromage et de vin en plein cours !

L'expérience la plus enrichissante a été de vivre dans une charmante famille d'accueil française qui m'a intégrée à son mode de vie, partagé sa culture et sa cuisine, et emmenée skier dans les Alpes à Noël. Ces innombrables heures de conversation ont transformé mon français et m'ont motivée à rejoindre le niveau le plus avancé en dernière année.

Dernière année et au-delà

Le temps passé outre-Manche a fait éclore notre amour pour le français, et voir la fierté de nos enseignantes à notre retour à Newcastle nous a rappelé le chemin parcouru. Notre parcours est loin d'être terminé, mais le perfectionnement de nos compétences orales en dernière année nous a préparées à des carrières réussies avec le français au cœur de nos avenir. Quand nous repensons à nos progrès, à notre amitié et aux souvenirs précieux de l'année dernière, il est clair que choisir le français *ab initio* reste sans aucun doute la meilleure décision que nous ayons prise.

Bonjour to Beyond... Our journey as *ab initio* French students at Newcastle University

Mary Bryning, Corinne Dart and Georgia Fletcher are final-year French students who started French when they arrived at Newcastle. 'Ab initio' is Latin for 'from the beginning'—it's a term you'll often hear about University language-learning. Here, Mary, Corinne and Georgia reflect on what that was like, and how far they've come.

It's September 2022 and we are sitting in our first ever French class, glancing around nervously and letting everything other than 'Bonjour' go completely over our heads. Little did we know that three years later we'd have lived and worked in France, submerged ourselves in French culture, navigated overnight Flixbuses and debates over whose cuisine is better, and be sitting our final oral exams as confident, eloquent French speakers.

Level A French was meticulously designed for complete beginners, combining structured grammar lectures and immersive vocabulary practice with close-knit seminars that allowed us to build our skills quickly without feeling overwhelmed. Our many contact hours a week were enriched with Cécilia's enthusiasm to support us outside of class time, leading us to quickly advance to A-Level standard within just a few months. *[This is talking about Cécilia Gil, one of our French lecturers—ed.]*

As we stepped into second year, our teachers' support went beyond the linguistic to aid us in our Year Abroad preparations. Classes were centred around CV writing, interview practice, demystifying French accommodation advertisements, and learning practical vocabulary to give us the best possible foundation for living and working in a Francophone environment. Outside of the classroom, Cécilia and Sandra *[Sandra Salin, another French lecturer—ed.]* shared their native insight to help us make informed decisions and ensure we continued to develop a rich linguistic and cultural understanding of French.

Studying French *ab initio* together also meant that academic milestones were never experienced alone. What started as us stumbling our way through basic greetings together, giggling at poor pronunciation, and lecturing each other on grammar quickly transformed into a friendship that sent us across borders together.



Georgia Fletcher, Mary Bryning, Corinne Dart, Rue de l'Université, Paris



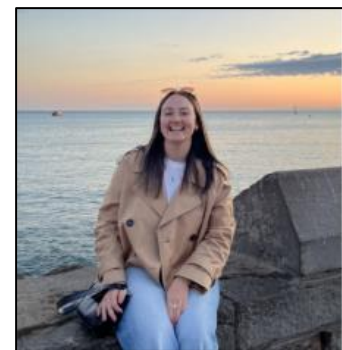
Corinne by the harbour in Sanary

Corinne

I began my year abroad teaching English to schoolchildren in Sanary-sur-Mer, a coastal town in the south of France. I was immediately grateful for the kindness of strangers, as my landlord introduced me to a French family who welcomed me into their lives, inviting me to dinners and family celebrations. Then during the summer, I was again immersed in the French language and culture when I worked in a French wine museum, guiding visitors through the region's rich wine history. It was truly an incredible experience that I will always look back on with fond memories.

Georgia

My year abroad took me from conjugating *être* and *avoir* to working professionally as an English teacher in Aix-en-Provence and exploring France on my weekends. Living with a French hostess introduced me to traditions like *galette des rois* and tested me to express myself every day in a country I had never been to before. Simple tasks like chatting with colleagues and ordering a *pain au chocolat* became milestones that showed me how far I'd come; it was surreal to see classroom role-plays become real conversations. Starting French ab initio allowed me to build a life in a whole new country.



Georgia by the sea in Sète



Mary in Toulouse

Mary

Like Georgia, I began my year abroad teaching English to adults in Aix-en-Provence and immersing myself in a French professional setting which, to my delight, involved long lunch breaks with my colleagues and cheese and wine tastings with my students in the middle of class! However, the most rewarding experience for me was living with a lovely French host family who absorbed me into their lifestyle, shared their culture and cuisine, and even took me skiing in the Alps for Christmas! It was those countless hours spent conversing which completely transformed my French, motivating me to pursue Level D French in final year.

Final Year and Beyond

Our time spent across the channel made our love for French truly blossom, and seeing our teachers' pride upon our return to Newcastle really reminded us just how far we've come. Our journey with French is far from complete, but honing our presentation skills in

final year has equipped us with the confidence and skills for a long, successful career with French at the centre. Reflecting on our progress, our friendship, and the beautiful memories made last year, choosing *ab initio* French was without doubt the best decision we ever made.

A day in the life of a Research Fellow in French cultural history

Dr Hannah Scott, Research Fellow in French Cultural History

Dr Hannah Scott is a Research Fellow in French cultural history in the School of Modern Languages. Her current project explores the role of music as a tool for communicating and responding to experiences of disease, public health, and medicine in nineteenth-century Paris, and she has wider interests in popular music, dance, variety theatre, & street spectacle.



Hannah Scott giving a talk from her piano

9am Sit down at the piano, put an 1870s anti-vax music-hall song on the stand, and attempt to work out why they thought yodelling would dissuade people from getting the smallpox jab. Attempt to learn to yodel – in French – in case this helps.

9.30am-midday Read voraciously, about myriad aspects of life and society; about comedy, about psychology, about urban planning, about public health, about gender, about racism, about inequality, about hope. One of the joys of being in modern languages is that it doesn't stop at learning the language; it means having the wonderful opportunity, day after day, to use words as a gateway to the people who speak them, to the inner workings of human society, and to the crux of who we are.

Today, I've been reading newspapers from the 1880s about whether working-class Parisians had undergone the same evolutionary processes as the upper-middle classes, or whether their frontal lobes were more like those of monkeys. Truly, scientific advances are only as good as the people who surround them...

Lunchtime Turn on a French pop music mix on Spotify or – guilty pleasure – a French TV talent show (preferably *Danse avec les stars*). I'm researching French performance culture, so this definitely counts as work.

12.30-2pm Work with colleagues on the outline for a possible new undergrad module. Debate which of the many exciting topics we have space to include. Can we fit in a seminar on the cancan? On plague? On photography from the French Empire? Shall we offer creative writing as an assessment option?

2-4pm Start work on translating a musical from the 1850s. I'm working with a researcher in theatre history to revive a show that hasn't been performed in over 150 years, to be

performed with participants and audiences from all around Newcastle. We're grappling with issues of historical accuracy, how to deal with the out-dated prejudices which come through the original script – especially about religion and body image – and how on earth to translate the puns so they are still funny despite being in a different language, place, and century.

4-5pm Attend a seminar to hear about the fascinating discoveries that my colleagues, including postgraduate researchers, have been making in their research projects – I've recently heard amazing talks on everything from German travelling theatres and recycling culture in China, to protest novels in French Guiana and the impact of recent politics on the European music industry.

The Italian Job (on a superyacht, with children)

Katya Quinton (Modern Languages and Linguistics, final year)

*Did you know that at Newcastle, as well as studying your main languages, you can also pick up other languages and have them count for credit in your degree? If you're doing French or Spanish, you can do Italian or Catalan; if you're doing German, you can do Dutch; and if you're doing Chinese or Japanese, you can do Korean. **Katya Quinton** is in her final year of Modern Languages and Linguistics, with French her main language, but she has also done Beginner's and Intermediate Italian. Here, she recounts some of the opportunities that doing Italian has given her—not things you'd get to do every day...*



Katya with her young charges

Durante l'estate del 2025, ho passato tre mesi a abitare con una famiglia ligure come ragazza alla pari. Avevo già fatto da settembre a maggio in Francia insegnando l'inglese in un collegio vicino a Parigi, e non volevo tornare in Inghilterra per fare il mio stesso lavoro in un club di vacanza per i bambini, quindi ho deciso di entrare in contatto con una donna milanese che avevo incontrato due anni prima, durante una vacanza di famiglia in Liguria dove ho provato a parlare l'italiano con il maggior numero di persone possibile. Ho condiviso il mio CV con lei e mi ha trovato questa famiglia che aveva bisogno di aiuto a casa con le loro due bambine: Matilde e Benedetta.

So, I ended up spending from May until August with this family. Entertaining the girls in the afternoons and evenings, and working in the parents' nautical accessory shop in the day, which included doing deliveries to their superyacht customers anywhere from Monaco to Genoa. I was also lucky enough to have been invited along to a wedding of a distant cousin in Sicily, meaning one Friday after work, the five of us, plus the nonni l'grandparents'—ed.] and an aunty hopped in a minivan and started our 16 hour quest from Imperia, Liguria to Acireale, Sicily.

È stata la miglior estate della mia vita, e volevo dimostrare che, dopo aver finito tutto quello che si deve fare per l'anno all'estero all'università, ci si può anche organizzare e passare un mese in un paese diverso, migliorando le lingue che avete imparato, nel miglior modo possibile—attraverso l'immersione.

It was the best summer of my life. It showed that after I'd done everything I needed to do for the Year Abroad, I could also organise to spend a few months in a different country, improving the other language I'd learned, and in the best way possible: immersion.