

Discovering Oneself and the World through French

I value the study of French because I am actually studying myself. I never understood so much about myself, my culture, my social habits, my thinking, until I started learning French. I always knew that there was more to the world than what I experienced in my hometown of 900 people, where most residents have never travelled outside of the United States. I was searching for something outside of an American mindset and value system. I discovered in French, especially thanks to travel in France, that the world was a much bigger place and that I was part of a bigger picture.

I started learning French out of curiosity, and a vague desire to communicate with some French family friends. After a school trip to Paris, I saw the application of French and understood the richness of the language and culture I was just beginning to discover. That trip literally changed my life. Even with only a semester of French, I had opened up a new world of possibilities.

I discovered that French is incredibly relevant to my interests. My particular interest in nineteenth century art and music has been greatly enriched by knowing French. For example, Paris was and is such a major capital in the arts. I love soaking up its culture and history and my French is an essential tool to do this. My knowledge of French also allows me to access a culture that is so rich in history, gastronomy, and tradition, that I will never tire of studying it.

Because of studying French, I have created meaningful, rich relationships with French people. I love talking with French people, showing them that Americans care about the world and want to reach out. The French recognize they have a small country, and make a small contribution in a big world. As an American, this is humbling and makes me reflect on the United States.

My exchanges with the French have always been positive and taught me real lessons on openness and acceptance of other ideas and practices. Studying abroad, I lived with a host family. I experienced simple things, like a different way of eating (taking time at a meal, eating different courses, etc) and the value of vacation and time off. But even these little things make me look at the world differently, and eventually I embraced some of these French traits. Working in France as an English teacher, I made friends and acquaintances who showed me true hospitality. I was also forced to be independent, finding my own housing, opening a bank account, buying a cell phone, etc. These experiences abroad were incredible personal accomplishments. I had to be resourceful to navigate my way and life in a foreign country, and I now feel at home in France.

Finally, I study French to better understand myself as an American in our global community. As an international language, French is still spoken all over the world, in business, and certainly in the European Union. I think that France is also in an interesting geographic position between northern and southern Europe. This central location only contributes to its importance in the European Union. Thus understanding French culture around the world is helpful to interpreting and understanding current events. I consider

news from the Francophone world in relation to the understanding I have from contact with French. In turn I feel like a responsible, knowledgeable member of society who can better understand the nuances of foreign affairs.

All of this has become so integrated into my life, from study abroad, working abroad, to my current French graduate studies, that it's difficult to step back and reflect on the role of French in my life. It has had an enormous impact on my worldview and, I feel, opened up many possibilities. I have already lived in France twice and I hope to go back. Each time, I learn more about the language and culture, while my own identity is also affected. French has become a part of me and my hope is to always keep it central in my life.

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