What is a catastrophe? How might earlier ways of thinking about catastrophes help us to think about those that we are going through now? And how does literature help us to do that?

The working thesis of this course is that the modern notion of catastrophe was invented in the eighteenth century, as causal interpretations of plagues and other cataclysms shifted away from the religious notion of divine punishment, toward natural and social explanations. This was also the period when the term catastrophe underwent a major semantic expansion: the term's older, theatrical meaning as a synonym of dénouement persisted, but authors increasingly adapted it to refer to personal dramas—or to cataclysms affecting an entire society or country. Catastrophism in this foundational era entailed both literary and philosophical responses to events perceived as unprecedented and unimaginable; and among other things, it inspired new forms of artistic representation.

This course will explore representations of catastrophes across various genres of 18th-century French literature. In our main module, we will focus on the ways in which Enlightenment-era authors thought both within and beyond calamity and catastrophe, and the forms of writing in which they did so. We will also examine the shadow of catastrophism that looms over the Encyclopédie, the French Enlightenment's grand collective attempt to preserve worthwhile knowledge for future generations. In the short final module, we will examine a couple of contemporary French and Francophone works that dwell on ruins or dramatize the unfolding of environmental and/or social disasters.

FR 431 is designed to provide a capstone-like experience for undergraduate French majors and certificate students. This "meets-with" course will be taught in French.

Corpus for FR431
Montesquieu, Les Lettres persanes
Prévost, Manon Lescaut
Voltaire, Candide [and, optionally, Zaïre]
Graffigny, Les Lettres d'une Péruvienne
Rousseau, Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité;
Diderot, Supplément au voyage de Bougainville; selected Encyclopédie articles; excerpts from Salons
Mercier, selected chapters of Tableau de Paris & Le Nouveau Paris
Sade, "Idée sur les romans," preface to Les Crimes de l'Amour & excerpts from La Nouvelle Justine
Maréchal, Le jugement dernier des rois, prophétie en un acte