Humanism Illustrates the Renaissance Spirit
Humanism

A literary movement that began in 14th century Italy, typified the Renaissance spirit.

Humanists

1. concerned themselves less with religious matters, but mainly with everyday human problems;

2. drew inspiration from classical civilization - eagerly seeking, studying, and publicizing ancient Greek and Roman manuscripts; and

3. revived interest, chiefly among educated people, in literature and writing.
Early Humanist Writers

- **Petrarch** (1304-1374), Italian, studied the classics and wrote in both Italian and Latin. His beautiful sonnets expressed romantic love and appreciation of nature. In longer works he imitated the style of classical writers.

- **Pico della Mirandola** (1463-1494), Italian, who lived for a while near Florence, was a scholar of law, philosophy, Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Arabic. In his writings he expressed unorthodox religious ideas—some of which he was censured by the Church—and he spoke in praise of the dignity of human beings.
Humanist Writers cont.

- **Erasmus** (1466-1536), Dutch, was a brilliant classical scholar. In his book Praise of folly, he ridiculed superstition, prejudice, upper class privileges, and Church abuses. By satirizing social evils, Erasmus encouraged people to think about reforms. Change!

- **Sir Thomas More** (1478-1535), English, wrote Utopia, a book that portrayed an ideal country, free from war, injustice, poverty, and ignorance.
The Vernacular Replaces Latin in Literature

During the Middle Ages in western Europe, Latin was the language of literature, of the Church, and of educated people. Over the centuries, however, other tongues had been evolving through everyday usage. These included French, Italian, Spanish, German and English – the vernacular, or spoken national languages. At the end of the Middle Ages, writers began to use vernacular languages in addition to Latin; later writers discarded Latin entirely. Early great writers who used the vernacular were:
Medieval Writers in the Vernacular

• **Dante** (1265-1321), Italian, born in Florence, served that city in various governmental positions until exiled by a hostile political faction. Known as the “father of modern Italian,” Dante was the first to write an important work in the vernacular. His *Divine Comedy*, a long poem, ranks among the greatest literary masterpieces. It describes Dante’s imaginary trip through Hell, purgatory and heaven, during which one of his guides is the Roman poet Vergil.
Medieval Writers in Vernacular cont.

- **Boccaccio** (1313-1375), Italian, lived in Florence during his formative years and absorbed the early Renaissance spirit. A humanist, poet and writer, Boccaccio is best known for his Italian prose in his collection of sophisticated short stories, *The Decameron*.

- **Chaucer** (1340-1400), English, became familiar with the works of Dante and Boccaccio while traveling in Italy. Chaucer used English in his collection of stories in verse, *The Canterbury Tales*. 
About 1450 printing with moveable type was invented by a German, Johann Gutenberg. As compared to medieval hand copying of books, printing tremendously increased output and accuracy and decreased cost. Inexpensive printed materials afforded all people opportunities for literacy and learning. Moreover, the availability of printing encouraged talented people to write.
Renaissance Literary Achievements

1. **Machiavelli** (1469-1527) Italian, born in Florence, served the Florentine Republic as secretary and diplomat, gaining firsthand political experience. When the Medici were restored to power in Florence, Machiavelli was dismissed from office and later permitted to retire to his country home where he devoted himself to writing.

   **The Prince**, Machiavelli’s major work on ethics and government, describes how rulers maintain power by methods that ignore moral idealism, right or wrong and accept the philosophy that “the end justifies the means.”

Although Machiavelli was probably describing what realistically takes place in government rather than what is morally right, our word machiavellian has come to mean “cunning and unscrupulous.”
Montaigne (1533-1592)

French, wrote a series of *Essays*. He expressed skepticism toward accepted beliefs, condemning superstition and intolerance and urging people to live nobly. This collection has been judged as the best example of the essay form.
Cervantes (1547-1616)

Spanish, ridiculed feudal society, especially knighthood and chivalry in relating the adventures of the mad knight of la mancha, **Don Quixote**.
Shakespeare (1564-1616)

English, is often considered to be the greatest poet and playwright of all time. In his sonnets he penned exquisite lines and evoked striking images. In his plays he employed superb dramatic technique to probe historical events and human character. Shakespeare’s best-known plays include the histories Henry IV and henry V; the comedies Twelfth Night and Midsummer Night’s Dream; and the tragedies Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Julius Caesar, and Macbeth.
To be or not to be, that is the question.

Hamlet

Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once.

Julius Caesar

If music be the food of love, play on.

Twelfth Night

What’s in a name. That which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet.

Romeo and Juliet
How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is, to have a thankless child.

King Lear