**The exemplar of classical literature**

The Qur'an is the most important and authentic example of Arabic literature and definitely the most influential.

The [Qur'an](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qur%27an) had a significant influence on the Arab language. The language used in it is called [classical Arabic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_Arabic), and while modern Arabic is very similar, the classical has social prestige. Not only is the Qur'an the first work of any significant length written in the language, but it also has a far more complicated structure than the earlier literary works with its 114 [suras](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sura%22%20%5Co%20%22Sura) (chapters) which contain 6,236 [ayat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayat%22%20%5Co%20%22Ayat) (verses). It contains [injunctions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Injunction), [narratives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative), [homilies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homily), [parables](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable), direct addresses from God, instructions and even comments on itself on how it will be received and understood. It is also admired for its layers of metaphor as well as its clarity, a feature it mentions itself in sura 16:103.

The word [Qur'an](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qur%27an) means 'recite', and in early times the text was transmitted orally. The first attempt at an authentic written version was during the reign of the third 'Rightly Guided Caliph', [Uthman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uthman%22%20%5Co%20%22Uthman) (576-656).

Although it contains elements of both prose and poetry, and therefore is closest to *[Saj](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhymed_prose%22%20%5Co%20%22Rhymed%20prose)* or [rhymed prose](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhymed_prose), the Qur'an is regarded as entirely apart from these classifications. The text is believed to be [divine revelation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_revelation) and is seen by [Muslims](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslims) as being eternal or 'uncreated'. This leads to the doctrine of [i'jaz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I%27jaz%22%20%5Co%20%22I%27jaz) or inimitability of the Qur'an which implies that nobody can copy the work's style.

Say, Bring you then ten chapters like unto it, and call whomsoever you can, other than God, if you speak the truth!

This doctrine of i'jaz possibly had a slight limiting effect on Arabic literature; proscribing exactly what could be written. Whilst Islam allows Muslims to write, read and recite poetry, the Qur'an states in the 26th sura ([Ash-Shu'ara](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ash-Shu%27ara) or The Poets) that poetry which is blasphemous, obscene, praiseworthy of sinful acts or attempts to challenge the Qu'ran's content and form is forbidden for Muslims.

And as to the poets, those who go astray follow them

Do you not see that they wander about bewildered in every valley? And that they say that which they do not do

Except those who believe and do good works and remember Allah much and defend themselves after they are oppressed; and they who act unjustly shall know to what final place of turning they shall turn back.

This may have exerted dominance over the pre-Islamic poets of the 6th century whose popularity may have vied with the Qur'an amongst the people. There were a marked lack of significant poets until the 8th century. One notable exception was [Hassan ibn Thabit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hassan_ibn_Thabit) who wrote poems in praise of [Muhammad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad) and was known as the "prophet's poet". Just as the [Bible](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible) has held an important place in the literature of other languages, The Qur'an is important to Arabic. It is the source of many ideas, allusions and quotes and its moral message informs many works.

Aside from the Qur'an the *[hadith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadith%22%20%5Co%20%22Hadith)* or tradition of what Muhammed is supposed to have said and done are important literature. The entire body of these acts and words are called *[sunnah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunnah%22%20%5Co%20%22Sunnah)* or way and the ones regarded as *sahih* or genuine of them are collected into hadith. Some of the most significant collections of hadith include those by [Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_ibn_al-Hajjaj) and [Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_ibn_Isma%27il_al-Bukhari).

The other important genre of work in Qur'anic study is the *[tafsir](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tafsir%22%20%5Co%20%22Tafsir)* or [commentaries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Close_reading) Arab writings relating to religion also includes many [sermons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermon) and devotional pieces as well as the sayings of [Ali](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali) which were collected in the 10th century as *[Nahj al-Balaghah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nahj_al-Balaghah%22%20%5Co%20%22Nahj%20al-Balaghah)* or *The Peak of Eloquence*.

**Islamic scholarship**

The research into the life and times of Muhammad, and determining the genuine parts of the sunnah, was an important early reason for scholarship in or about the Arabic language. It was also the reason for the collecting of pre-Islamic poetry; as some of these poets were close to the prophet—[Labid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lab%C4%ABd%22%20%5Co%20%22Lab%C4%ABd) meeting Muhammad and converting to Islam—and their writings illuminated the times when these events occurred. Muhammad also inspired the first Arabic [biographies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biography), known as A*l-Sirah Al-Nabawiyyah*; the earliest was by [Wahb ibn Munabbih](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahb_ibn_Munabbih%22%20%5Co%20%22Wahb%20ibn%20Munabbih), but [Muhammad ibn Ishaq](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_ibn_Ishaq) wrote the best known. Whilst covering the life of the prophet they also told of the battles and events of early Islam and have numerous digressions on older biblical traditions.

Some of the earliest work studying the Arabic language was started in the name of Islam. Tradition has it that the caliph [Ali](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali), after reading a copy of Qur'an with errors in it, asked [Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_al-Aswad_al-Du%27ali) to write a work codifying [Arabic grammar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_grammar). [Khalil ibn Ahmad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khalil_ibn_Ahmad%22%20%5Co%20%22Khalil%20ibn%20Ahmad) would later write *Kitab al-Ayn*, the first dictionary of Arabic, along with works on [prosody](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosody_%28linguistics%29) and [music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music), and his pupil [Sibawayh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sibawayh%22%20%5Co%20%22Sibawayh) would produce the most respected work of Arabic grammar known simply as *al-Kitab* or *The Book*.

Other caliphs exerted their influence on Arabic with ['Abd al-Malik](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abd_al-Malik_ibn_Marwan) making it the official language for the administration of the new empire, and [al-Ma'mun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Ma%27mun) setting up the *Bayt al-Hikma* or [House of Wisdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_Wisdom) in [Baghdad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baghdad) for research and translations. [Basrah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basrah) and [Kufah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kufa%22%20%5Co%20%22Kufa) were two other important seats of learning in the early Arab world, between which there was a strong rivalry.

The institutions set up mainly to investigate more fully the Islamic religion were invaluable in studying many other subjects. Caliph [Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hisham_ibn_Abd_al-Malik%22%20%5Co%20%22Hisham%20ibn%20Abd%20al-Malik) was instrumental in enriching the literature by instructing scholars to translate works into Arabic. The first was probably [Aristotle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristotle)'s correspondence with [Alexander the Great](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_the_Great) translated by Salm Abu al-'Ala'. From the east, and in a very different literary genre, the scholar [Abdullah Ibn al-Muqaffa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdullah_Ibn_al-Muqaffa) translated the animal [fables](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fable) of the *[Panchatantra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panchatantra%22%20%5Co%20%22Panchatantra)*. These translations would keep alive scholarship and learning, particularly that of [ancient Greece](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greece), during the [Dark Ages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_Ages_%28historiography%29) in Europe and the works would often be first re-introduced to Europe from the Arabic versions.

Classical Arabic literature

**Poetry**[

*Main article:*[*Arabic poetry*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_poetry)

A large proportion of Arabic literature before the 20th century is in the form of poetry, and even prose from this period is either filled with snippets of poetry or is in the form of *[saj'](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saj%27%22%20%5Co%20%22Saj%27)* or rhymed prose. The themes of the poetry range from high-flown hymns of praise to bitter personal attacks and from religious and mystical ideas to poems on women and wine. An important feature of the poetry which would be applied to all of the literature was the idea that it must be pleasing to the ear. The poetry and much of the prose was written with the design that it would be spoken aloud and great care was taken to make all writing as mellifluous as possible.

**Non-fiction literature**

**Compilations and manuals**

In the late 9th century [Ibn al-Nadim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_al-Nadim%22%20%5Co%20%22Ibn%20al-Nadim), a [Baghdadi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baghdad) bookseller, compiled a crucial work in the study of Arabic literature. *Kitab al-Fihrist* is a catalogue of all books available for sale in Baghdad and it gives an overview of the state of the literature at that time.

One of the most common forms of literature during the [Abbasid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbasid) period was the compilation. These were collections of facts, ideas, instructive stories and poems on a single topic and covers subjects as diverse as house and garden, women, gate-crashers, blind people, envy, animals and misers. These last three compilations were written by [al-Jahiz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Jahiz) the acknowledged master of the form. These collections were important for any *nadim*, a companion to a ruler or noble whose role was often involved regaling the ruler with stories and information to entertain or advise.

A type of work closely allied to the collection was the manual in which writers like [ibn Qutaybah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Qutaybah%22%20%5Co%20%22Ibn%20Qutaybah) offered instruction in subjects like etiquette, how to rule, how to be a bureaucrat and even how to write. [Ibn Qutaybah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Qutaybah%22%20%5Co%20%22Ibn%20Qutaybah) also wrote one of the earliest histories of the Arabs, drawing together biblical stories, Arabic [folk tales](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folklore) and more historical events.

The subject of sex was frequently investigated in Arabic literature. The *[ghazal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghazal%22%20%5Co%20%22Ghazal)* or love poem had a long history being at times tender and chaste and at other times rather explicit. In the [Sufi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sufi) tradition, the love poem would take on wider, mystical and religious importance. Sex manuals were also written such as [*The Perfumed Garden*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Perfumed_Garden), *[Ṭawq al-Ḥamāmah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ring_of_the_Dove%22%20%5Co%20%22The%20Ring%20of%20the%20Dove)* or *The Dove's Neckring* by [ibn Hazm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Hazm%22%20%5Co%20%22Ibn%20Hazm) and *Nuzhat al-albab fi-ma la yujad fi kitab* or *Delight of Hearts Concerning What will Never Be Found in a Book* by [Ahmad al-Tifashi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmad_al-Tifashi). Countering such works are one like *Rawdat al-muhibbin wa-nuzhat al-mushtaqin* or *Meadow of Lovers and Diversion of the Infatuated* by [ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Qayyim_al-Jawziyyah%22%20%5Co%20%22Ibn%20Qayyim%20al-Jawziyyah) who advises on how to separate love and lust and avoid sin.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_literature>