

John Milton: Summary



In 1643, the Parliament of England was concerned that they had no control over what was being printed throughout the country. They were especially angry about people writing negative things about the church or the government. As a result, they passed a law known as the Licensing Order of 1643. This law required every written document to be approved by the government before it could be printed. The next year, famed author and poet John Milton published a pamphlet called *Areopagitica*. It presented his reasons for opposing this law and his argument for allowing freedom of speech and of the press.

1. Milton argued that “the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely” was the most important liberty.
2. He said it is impossible to know whether an idea is a good one, unless people are free to argue about the idea.
3. Milton claimed that, “He who destroys a good book, kills reason itself,” because when you destroy a book, you destroy all the ideas in the book, as well as all that remains of the author who wrote them.
4. He also argued that there is nothing to fear from bad ideas or false statements, because eventually true claims and good ideas will win out, if people are able to argue about all of them. In modern times, this concept is called the “marketplace of ideas” (which is the concept that ideas compete for listeners, just like car makers compete to sell cars to buyers).
5. Truth is made up of a combination of ideas, so if some ideas are banned, we will never learn the whole truth about a matter.