Chronology of Rousseau’s life (1712–78)

1712 Born in Geneva in a Protestant family. His mother dies in childbirth.
1722 Rousseau’s father, Isaac, is forced to leave Geneva, and Rousseau spends two years in the care of a local minister. His father later remarries and abandons Jean-Jacques.
1727 Rousseau begins work as an apprentice to an engraver and flees the following year. The sixteen-year-old meet Mme de Warrens. With her encouragement he converts to Catholicism. She ensures him a position as a servant for Mme de Vercellis and the Count de Gouvon. Guilty of a petty crime, Rousseau blames the deed on an innocent maid.
1729 Returns to Mme de Warrens, attends a seminary but is – understandably – deemed unfit for priesthood.
1730–32 Spends two years hiking. During the winter months he lives in Neuchatel, where he gives music lessons. He goes to Paris for the first time to seek his fortune as a tutor, but is only offered jobs as a servant. Begins to earn his living from note-copying.
1737 Goes to Geneva to claim his maternal inheritance, and travels on to Montpellier. Returns to Mme de Warrens, and finds himself displaced by another toyboy.
1740 Finds work in Lyon as tutor for M. de Mably’s children. Unhappy he returns to Mme de Warrens.
1742 Rousseau – driven by amour propre – seeks his fortune in the fast lane. He presents a new method for musical notation and becomes acquainted with the famous men of letters.
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1743 Looking for support from upper-class women he finds work as a tutor for Mme Dupin. Through Mme de Broglie he finds work as an assistant for the French ambassador to Venice. He feels let down because of his background. Decides to write Institutions Politique, which in due course becomes Du Contrat Social. Writes Dissertation sur la musique moderne and Les Muses galantes.

1744–45 He returns to Paris but begins to feel ill at ease with the somewhat superficial life in the Paris salons. He begins a lifelong relationship with Thérèse Levasseur, a cleaning lady, who gives birth to four children (all sent to the foundling home). Also in this year he revises Rameau’s and Voltaire’s opera Les Fêtes de Ramire. It becomes a success but Rousseau receives no credit for the work.


1749 Rousseau reads an advert in a newspaper asking ‘if the re-establishment of the arts and the sciences have contributed to an improvement in the morals of man’. He writes the Discourse sur les sciences et les arts, and becomes famous.

1751 The first volume of the Encyclopedia is published. Rousseau reveals in a letter why he has abandoned his children.

1752 Rousseau composes Le Devin du Village and presents it for the king. He is offered a lifelong pension. He refuses!

1753 He publishes the Letter on French Music (written the previous year). He praises Italian music and disparages French music – especially that of Rameau.

1754 He writes the Discourse sur l’inégalité, the Discourse on Political Economy, returns to Geneva (regains his citizenship) but soon returns to France, where he breaks up with his friends. Begins writing Essai sur l’origine des langues.

1756–62 Upon an invitation of Mme d’Épinay, Rousseau retires to a cottage (‘L’Ermitage’) in the woods of Montmorency, where in the quiet of nature he expected to spend his life. He breaks with Diderot. However, he becomes infatuated with Countess d’Houdetot, and after a scandalous scene he changes his residence to a chateau in the park of the duke of Luxembourg, in Montmorency (1758–62). During this period he writes: Letter à Voltaire sur la Providence (1756); Lettre à d’Alembert...
Chronology of Rousseau's life

(published in Amsterdam, 1758); Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse (1761); Du Contrat Social (published in Amsterdam, 1762); and Emile ou de l'éducation (published in Amsterdam, 1762). The last-named work was ordered to be burned by the French parliament and his arrest was demanded. In 1762 Rousseau escapes to Neuchatel, then within the jurisdiction of Prussia. He begins Le Lévitique d'Ephraïm and Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont. He also begins work on Pygmalion. He writes an autobiographical note in a letter to Melherbes.

1763–66 Rousseau writes Lettres écrites de la montagne, an analysis of the Genevan constitution. In this he advocates the freedom of religion against the Church and police. Rousseau is driven out of his house by an angry mob (September 1765), he returns to the Isle St. Pierre in the Lake of Bienne (where he writes Projet sur la constitution de la Corse). But the government of Berne orders him out of its territory, and he accepts the asylum offered to him by David Hume in England (January 1766). He falls out with Hume (driven by an insane sense of being persecuted).

1767–78 He returns to France. Marries Thérèse Levasseur. After wandering about – under the assumed name of Renou – and depending on friends he is permitted to return to Paris (1770), where he finishes the Confessions and other biographical writings, Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques (Dialogues), as well as his Considérations sur la gouvernement du Pologne and Lettres sur la botanique à Madame Delessert.

1778 He accepts an invitation to retire to Ermenonville, but dies soon after. Shortly before his death he writes his Revieures d’un promeneur solitaire.

1794 His remains are taken from Ermenonville to Parthéon, where his coffin is placed next to Voltaire's.