YR 12 PRE-STUDY TASK: MISS SMITH
HISTORY: FRENCH REVOLUTION AND NAPOLEON UNIT

What were people complaining about in early 1780s France?

This is a mini essay (500 words minimum) about the long term causes of the French Revolution. You will need to do some research to tackle the question. I have suggested some resources below. DO NOT go beyond 1789 (the question is early 1780s so I am looking for a general background not specific events of the revolution itself.)

You will need to cover the following points. You can divide your essay into these three sections:

1. What was unfair about the tax system and the system of government?
2. What was unfair about the class system?
3. What impact did the new ideas of the Enlightenment have?

Start with the general resources on Youtube.
These are some of the better ones:

1. Causes of the French Revolution: www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDg53_OFN7o
2. The French Revolution in a nutshell: www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEZqarUnVpo

Then look at some key text-based resources:
I have attached a summary (see below) of the key areas. There are also some references to historians here too.

Other textbooks:
Dave Martin: The French Revolution (this will be our standard textbook so you may want to buy it in advance. I ordered an extra copy for my ipad – and it is really good as it has links to websites..)
Access to History: France in Revolution 1774-1815. 5th edition (again a textbook which we will use a lot)

Also look at some historical fiction on this topic:
A place of Greater Safety by Hilary Mantel
A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens
Scarlet Pimpernel by Baroness Orczy

Or start to read some historians views on the topic:
Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution by Ruth Scurr
Citizens by Simon Sharma
The French Revolution by Christopher Hibbert

I AM NOT EXPECTING YOU TO READ ALL OF THESE! BUT JUST START TO GET FAMILIAR WITH THE BACKGROUND: WHAT WAS FRANCE LIKE IN THE 1780S?
CAUSES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

LONG TERM REASONS

The French Revolution was, like the Russian Revolution of 1917, the result of a combination of short-term and long-term factors, triggered off by the momentous events of a single year, in this case 1789.

The Estates System. France was a rigidly classified society divided into three estates. These estates had their own rights and privileges in the case of the first two, and lots of onerous duties and responsibilities in the case of the Third.

“We were the First Estate. Made up of around 130 000 members, we were the cardinals, archbishops, bishops, abbots, nuns, monks - and humble curates. We paid no taxes whatsoever, but every few years would present a monetary gift to the King. We owned about 10% of the land in France and even had our own courts. Many of us were fabulously wealthy and powerful and had served as ministers of the King, like Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin. The wealth and power of the Church had led to a certain level of anticlericalism in France. However, the majority of us were ordinary village priests who were loved by our peasant flocks”.

“We are the Second Estate and comprised the aristocracy of 400 000 members. We had enormous privileges and droits or rights. We paid a few taxes, but most of the truly onerous ones like the taille and the corvee we certainly did not. We even had a term for those who paid the former. We contemptuously called them ‘the taillable’ meaning those who were directly taxed. We were so snobbish and aloof that we divided ourselves into three hierarchies: with the court nobles being the true elite, then the nobility of the sword and those of the robe coming last, as many were government ministers and civil servants who had only been ennobled in the last hundred years or so”.

“We are the Third Estate”
This rigid system meant even the 1st Estate was increasingly the preserve of the nobility, while just to be an officer in the army required generations of noble ancestry. The King was advised solely by the nobility. Opportunities were thus closed to men of education and talent with no title. It is not a coincidence that, as Christopher Hibbert has stressed, the main leaders of the Revolution would be highly educated members of the middle class and in particular failed writers and lawyers. Danton, one of the leaders of the Revolution, would say that “the ancien regime drove us [to revolution] by giving us a good education, without opening any opportunity for our talents”.

The 2nd Estate was regarded as parasitical, as it enjoyed its many droits without living up to any of its responsibilities. The economic problems of the 1770s and 1780s were increasingly passed down to the peasantry by their noble landlords, who had nothing but contempt for their tenant farmers. In France, the local squire certainly did not play cricket on the village green with his tenants - nor did he pay his way. A bankrupt France was not allowed to tax the very people who had all the money!

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"We were the Third Estate. We made up the vast majority of France’s 26 million people. We, however, were not really an homogeneous group like the others, as we comprised everyone from doctors and lawyers and rich merchants to artisans and peasants. We paid all the taxes and had onerous duties like paying for the roads and bridges to be repaired. We had no say in government, despite the fact that our members were often the best educated people in society. We detested the Second Estate, especially, which was holding us back and refusing to relinquish any of its enormous privileges or allow us to enter its ranks".

Royal Absolutism. Since the times of the dictatorial and bigoted Louis XIV, French kings had been invested with enormous powers (e.g. the infamous lettres de cachet, censorship, etc.).
Louis XIV had been heavily responsible through his innumerable wars for the parlous state of the French monarchy’s finances by 1789. A megalomaniac, he had developed the ideas of absolutism and had strived for hegemony of Europe. His Chief Minister, Cardinal Mazarin taught him belief in divine kingship, along with a cynicism and contempt for his fellow Man. He was a spendthrift womaniser with an insatiable sexual appetite. However, Louis had also been capable, charming, accomplished and competent. He had been an ideal king.

However, unlike the Sun King, the present monarch, Louis XVI was not a prepossessing figure. Kind, generous, a loving family man, he was also indolent, indecisive and vacillating. A pious man with an enormous appetite, who preferred to hunt rather than attend to the affairs of state, it did not help that he was short and fat (1.70m and 120kg), and hardly looked very regal. His hobbies were also rather plebeian. His two brothers: the Counts of Provence and Artois were extreme reactionaries and rarely gave their elder sibling sensible advice.

His extravagant Austrian wife, Marie-Antoinette, hardly helped with his image. _Grant and Temperley_ have even claimed that she was a “powerful and dangerous counsellor” to her husband. She had helped in the dismissal of the progressive finance minister Turgot, for instance.

The royalist system would be referred to as the _ancien regime_, so anachronistic was it. The nobility were becoming increasingly resentful of royal power and attacks on its institutions, like the _parlements_ or law courts. They were also disinclined to pay any new taxes, which the increasingly insolvent monarchy needed to impose, in order to pay its debts. It was Louis’ willingness to contemplate an erosion of the 2nd Estates rights that would drive them into an alliance of convenience with the 3rd Estate. They demanded the re-calling of the Estates General, a type of parliament that had not sat since 1614, hoping to put pressure on the King. To the 3rd Estate, the Estates General would give them a chance of representation, at last.

_S. J. Lee_ is very critical of Louis whom he says oversaw the loss of direction of government policy and refers to his “chaotic economic and fiscal system” which, for example, saw him sign a free trade treaty in 1786 with GB, which unleashed the forces of _laissez faire_ at the exact time when the struggling economy most needed protection. This made the 3rd Estate even more determined on a parliamentary monarchy so that its commercial interests could be represented. The well-meaning, but incompetent and ineffectual antics of the King’s finance ministers like Calonne and Necker hardly helped matters or endeared the King to the nobility whom they were threatening to tax. It was this attack on the most privileged of classes (whose discontent had been apparent as early as 1787) that ironically spurred the French Revolution into life.

The 3rd Estate wanted a review of all the inequitable taxes and a reduction, but not abolition, of the monarchy’s powers. These ideas were expressed often in the words of liberal and Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu, though _Lee_ (and _Matthews_) stresses they were used merely to articulate the demands of the reformers rather than having drawn up their policies. In the same way, the American war of Independence (1775-1781), in which many Frenchmen had fought (and which more importantly had contributed to France’s insolvency), had an influence on the thinking behind the demands of the 3rd Estate (and even some of the Second).

Louis XVI was not as astute and clever as Louis XIV who had used the support of the bourgeoisie to keep the nobility under control and so relatively docile. Nor was he as ruthless as other French kings like Louis XI, the infamous ‘Spider King’. Such ‘divide and rule’ principles, as utilised by _Le Soleil Roi_, were beyond the later Louis’ limited political understanding. By calling an Estates General, says _Lee_, Louis was acknowledging “the collapse of absolutism and the existence of a political vacuum at the centre”. _Grant and Temperley_ put it more clearly, describing how it was “not inflexibility, but weakness of will that
was his bane”. While Matthews comments that: “the king can be said to bear major responsibility for bringing things to a head in June 1789”.

Common problems affecting Europe. Lee, like Palmer and Godechot, has also stresses that France’s revolution was part of a general wave of unrest in Europe and even North America. Enormous population growth (from 100 to 200 million people between 1700-1800); the severe economic crises of the 1770s and 1780s, and the innate instability of government were not restricted to France. France, however, experienced the most momentous and lasting changes because it had the strongest bourgeoisie and elements of social co-operation, while the peasantry also supported the Revolution. Consensual factors that were absent in other countries.

Ultimately, though the fundamental reasons for the events of 1789 were the result of the above factors, the short-term more direct considerations were of even more paramount concern. Grant and Temperley are certainly convinced that France was in no danger of revolution until the late 1780s.