

1984

By George Orwell

Summer reading guide.

Intro:

In English literature and in [American political thought](#), *1984* is a force. George Orwell's final novel, the text of *1984* was completed while Orwell wasted away from Tuberculosis in 1950, just as the global tensions of the Cold War began to simmer. It's a prophetic novel that Orwell called his "letter to the future." But from his bed at the edge of death, Orwell saw a dismal future, one so bleak it helped coin the term dystopia (as an antonym to [utopia](#)). In Orwell's Oceania (a super-state of roughly the UK and the US) in the year 1984, all life is controlled by the Party, and its leader big brother. From language, to industry, to love, all things flow through the image of Big Brother's dominance. But the novel's main character, Winston, resists.

The novel has long been a byword for the modern understanding of [totalitarian](#) governments, those dictatorships and party [autocracies](#) that hope to control every aspect of the lives of the people they dominate. One of the ways the novel interrogates this dystopian future is through the description of [mass surveillance](#) using technology.

As you read the text this summer, be on the lookout for major **concepts** you can bring into discussion when we return in the fall.

Major concepts to look out for and interrogate:

For the ideas below, ask yourself, what does the text illustrate about _____?

Freedom, Slavery, Love, War, Ignorance, Sight, Watching, Nature, Restriction of Language, Class and the Proles, "foreigners" and hate, emotional control and political control.

We will be working in the first week of class to examine the ideas of the prompts below.

Prepare your ideas for the first week of school, and take notes as necessary to help you support your ideas from the text.

Critical Questions:

Who is Winston Smith? Orwell was concerned in his work with how class perspective shifts and distorts our understanding of the world. So who is Winston? What's his class position in the text, and what's his age and childhood like? What unique perspectives do those details of his life give him?

Where do we see "sight" or what is seen and what is hidden? How does Orwell manipulate what we can "see" in the text? Collect 5 places where a character "sees" something, or "hides" from the sight of authority. What are the different ways in which characters hide?

Julia and freedom. How does the prospect of love change the way Winston sees freedom? What are the different "emblems" of freedom in the text that help keep Winston going as the text moves forward?

The appendix, language, and the "text as object." Read the appendix carefully. What does the appendix imply about the "future" of 1984 in its tone and tense. What does it imply about the novel and its larger "world" and the hope for a future without Big Brother.

Personal Reflective Questions:

Orwell's dystopia focused on an amplification of the control a dictatorship has on our lives – what "control" element in your life could you amplify to create a dystopia? Pick an element of "control" you see and amplify it to create a dystopian world.

What would you do in Winston's position? Write yourself into the novel's situation, and think about what you'd do if you were Winston, stuck in this world, brutalized by the party. Where would you find freedom?

Thought Experiments:

Try to write a summary of a chapter in “Newspeak” using as little words as possible. What can’t you express about the scene in Newspeak? What do you think gets lost?

Where is a space where you “get away” from the restrictions of your world? Find an alcove or a “hidden” space and use that space to create a place of reflection (like Winston’s corner of his room). How does being “alone” affect your mood? How does it make you free, or unfree to be in that space?