



1984

one book
one college

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Educational Materials for *1984*

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Welcome to the
Ministry of Peace.



Book Summary

1984, first published in 1948, is based on a dystopian vision of the future where the freedom of the individual is subjugated to the conformity of society. The novel focuses on Winston Smith, who works for the Ministry of Truth, a branch of the government responsible for the dissemination of information. Each day begins for all citizens with a Two Minutes' Hate session, which promotes fear and paranoia in order to ensure that people follow the wishes of Big Brother. In this world, children act as spies on parents, party members work for terrible food and housing, and all individuality is washed away under the constant, ever-present gaze of Big Brother. As the novel unfolds, it becomes apparent that Winston Smith is unhappy with his life. He finds a girl, Julia, who shares his desire for a more meaningful life. Smith's revolt against society will eventually bring him eye to eye with Big Brother, when he must decide if he truly loves Julia, freedom, or Big Brother.

George Orwell (1903-1950)

George Orwell occupies a place of distinction among 20th century authors. His works redefined the relationship between the individual and society. Terms such as "Orwellian" and "Big Brother" continue to be used in the discourse of public life. In his life, Orwell was a part of the Indian Imperial Police force that enforced strict rule by Britain over India and he fought in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. These experiences directly contributed to many of his novels. Most famous of these works are *Animal Farm* and *1984*, both of which comment on the rise of fascism, the inequalities between social classes, and the need within society for personal and political freedoms.

Themes

Drawing on Orwell's *1984*, Moraine Valley One Book will focus on the following themes for events and discussions:

- **Personal Freedom, Expression, and Society**
Throughout the book, Winston yearns to break away from the gaze of Big Brother. His yearnings eventually bring him into direct conflict with the Ministry of Love and society itself. All societies strike a balance between personal freedom and the needs of society. Laws and social norms keep

individuals in line, so that the balance remains intact. Some individuals purposely cross the line, and they suffer the consequences. *1984* challenges us to review the rules that govern our society. It asks us to consider the meaning of freedom.

- **Freedom and Technology**

Despite the fact that this book is nearly 60 years old, its story employs technology (such as the telescreens in all homes) in a way that monitors individuals and potentially limits society's freedom. Our current technological landscape allows us to reach out around our world. In some cases, such as in China or North Korea, technology is a liberating force. But, new technologies also allow others to watch our lives in new ways.

- **Appearances and Reality**

The key way that Big Brother keeps control of society is through the manipulation of reality. History, language, news, mathematics, and truth itself are subject to the goals of Big Brother. All meaning comes from society, and this reaches the ultimate point where individuals do not seek their own meanings. They only accept the meanings given to them.

- **Love, Relationships, and Society**

Winston and Julia defy Big Brother with their love affair. They seek comfort in each other's arms but, ultimately, their relationship cannot withstand the pressures of their jobs and the conformity around them.

- **Utopia, Dystopia, and Speculative Fiction**

Orwell presents the reader with a frightening vision of the future. His line of literature speculates about the things to come and offers us warning about our society. Writers such as Yevgeny Zamyatin, Kurt Vonnegut, William Gibson, and Margaret Atwood have followed in this tradition.

Study Questions

1. How would you describe the love between Winston and Julia? How do you think our society impacts the relationship between people who are in love?
2. In this book, Big Brother is always watching. Do we have our own "Big Brother" who watches us today? How has technology changed our understanding of "Big Brother"?
3. Many people and organizations have access to information about us from our local doctor's office, to insurance companies, to employers, or to our e-mail provider. How do we ensure that these organizations do not become the next Big Brother? How do scientific developments such as the human genome project change our conceptualization of Big Brother?
4. *1984* is written as a "dystopia" or dark view of the future. Do you find this to be an effective setting for fiction? What are the problems or advantages with using a dystopian setting as opposed to a realistic setting?
5. In the United States, like many countries, feelings of patriotism and love of country are regarded as positive aspects of citizenship. How is patriotism portrayed in *1984*? How do we deal with our feelings of patriotism when we disagree with our government? How should disagreement with our government be expressed?
6. History can be viewed as a story that uses past events to explain the present. How did the Ministry of Truth manipulate history in order to accomplish its goals? How do we use our own history to tell the story of our country?
7. In *1984*, the Ministry of Truth manipulates information to control what people know about their government and the outside world. How do we get information about our world? How would we know if this information is manipulated?

8. *1984* has often been held up as an example of why the Bill of Rights and personal freedoms are important. Do you think *1984* still has relevance for our world today? Do you think this book's meaning has changed following September 11, 2001?
9. As a piece of art, few artistic visions have had the impact of *1984*. What other works have influenced how we think about our government and society? How do these works enliven discussion and teach us about ourselves?
10. In writing *1984*, Orwell drew heavily from Yevgeny Zamyatin's work *We*. These two books share a common story line and many common themes. How do artists draw on other artists for inspiration? Where is the line between inspiration and plagiarism?
11. How would you describe the end of the book? What does it mean that Winston "won the victory over himself"?