

Bloom's Literature

How to Write about Nineteen Eighty Four

Reading to Write

Published in 1949, Orwell's classic dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (or *1984* as it is often published now), has become so well known as to have provided a sort of shorthand for critiques of overly intrusive and heavy-handed government. One need only to apply the epithet of "Big Brother" to a government or organization in order to conjure up the nightmarish oppression so vividly portrayed in Orwell's most famous novel. *1984* depicts a fictional society ruled by an oppressive regime that functions mainly to ensure and to increase its own power and status. To this end, Big Brother demands complete obedience and allows its subjects very little in the way of personal freedom of action or expression. Not for lack of considerable effort, the government has been unsuccessful in wiping out all thoughts of rebellion. Protagonist Winston Smith marshals the courage to engage in a small act that is considered a terrible crime by the party: recording his own thoughts in a private diary. Winston's journal reveals a great deal about the society in which he lives and about his own inner workings as well. Have a look at the scene that describes Winston making an entry in his journal:

He was a lonely ghost uttering a truth nobody would ever hear. But so long as he uttered it, in some obscure way the continuity was not broken. It was not by making yourself heard but by staying sane that you carried on the human heritage. He went back to the table, dipped his pen, and wrote:

To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and do not live alone—to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone:

From the age of uniformity, from the age of solitude, from the age of Big Brother, from the age of doublethink—greetings! (26–27)

That Winston is concerned about carrying on what he considers to be the "human heritage" makes it clear that he believes that the society he lives in strips its citizens not only of their freedom but of their very humanity. When he writes in his diary, Winston compares his own totalitarian society to an alternative society; though he is not sure if that society is to be found in the "present" or the "past," Winston clearly visualizes an alternative to party society, a fundamentally different world that recognizes and allows for the humanity of its inhabitants.

At this point, you might be wondering how it is that a government can take away the humanity of its citizens and if such a feat is, in fact, possible. To figure this out, think about what Winston sees as the defining qualities of humanity. We can begin to do this by examining his roughly parallel descriptions of his own age of dehumanization and the alternate past or present age he imagines. To begin with, while his own age is one of "uniformity," Winston imagines the other possible society as one in which "thought is free" and "men are different from one another." This comparison makes two points clear: One, that when Winston speaks of uniformity in Oceania, he means that all people are expected to share the same thoughts and opinions and, two, that he thinks it more natural or correct for people to engage in their own thought processes which, when combined with their life's experiences, will lead them to their own personal conclusions and opinions. The expression of those unique thoughts will inevitably create people who are recognizably different from one another. So, we can say that one aspect of humanity, according to Winston, is freedom of thought and the related freedom to create a unique identity based at least in part on those thoughts.

Further, Winston speaks of his age as the age of solitude and of the alternative age as one in which men "do not live alone." He indicates here that one of the ways Oceania divests its citizens of their humanity is by preventing them from establishing relationships with one another. You might note at this point that Oceania's citizens spend a great deal of time with one another at party-mandated events that seem to fill up their every waking hour. While this lifestyle would certainly not be considered solitude in the traditional sense, it is designed to reinforce certain behaviors and ideas that the party wants to cultivate rather than to foster true interpersonal interaction. Winston's indication that people should not "live alone" suggests that he sees true community, true relationships, as something that involves making a choice between sharing and privacy. In other words, the only way to have a true relationship with another person is to choose to trade privacy for spending time with that person, a situation that requires one to

have ownership of one's own time in the first place. Winston suggests these kinds of relationships—not directed group activity—to be the kinds of interactions that are vital to the human experience.

Finally, when Winston despairs over Big Brother and doublethink, he imagines an alternative society in which "truth exists" and "what is done cannot be undone." Setting up this comparison, Winston criticizes his own society for being so driven by party ideology that it requires its citizens to engage in complicated mental processes, often denying what they perceive as reality, in order to adapt to the party's self-serving and constantly fluctuating versions of reality and history. Winston wants to live in a society that acknowledges what is real whether or not it serves the goals of the people in power. How, then, is what is "real" determined? Winston seems to believe that truth and history lie in the individual citizen's observations and memories. Were they allowed to express these, presumably they would arrive at some sort of collective interpretation. Further, although all societies have, in some form, competing visions of truth and alternate versions of history, presumably, in the kind of society Winston imagines, an individual who holds a view inconsistent with the mainstream consensus would be allowed to retain that view and even to argue for it to others.

We have now established that Winston views freedom of thought, interpersonal relationships, and the power to participate in the social processes of interpreting "truth" and recording "history" as the fundamental building blocks of humanity that Big Brother strips away. Winston wants to ensure that there is a possibility of achieving an alternative society that respects these needs, and he believes that to keep this possibility alive he must ensure the "continuity" of humanity. But how does one do that in such an oppressive world? Winston has a tentative link to a time before the party; he has memories and dreams of his mother and their life in a different world, but those who were born later, like Julia, do not. All they know is life under party rule. If they cannot remember the fundamental aspects of their humanity, and those who remember cannot pass it on to them in any way, then how will the continuity of humanity be sustained? Winston decides that the way to preserve the human heritage is simply to retain his own sanity, his own humanity. Presumably, Winston is thinking that there are other "lonely ghosts" who remember, or discover, their humanity besides himself and that as long as those people persevere, then when the opportunity for revolution arises, someone will be there to recognize and take advantage of it.

These observations bring up questions you might want to pursue. For one, you might want to think about whether or not Winston is ultimately successful if judged by his own terms. Winston actively engages in actions to preserve what he considers his humanity—engaging in a personal relationship with Julia; expressing his thoughts to her, to O'Brien, and to his diary; and refusing to believe party propaganda when it conflicts with his own personal sense of reality and truth. Winston pursues these things even though he knows that they will result in torture and death. By claiming and holding on to his humanity and his sanity for as long as he is able, do you think Winston has successfully done his part in preserving humanity's heritage? Or do you think the fact that he is ultimately brainwashed nullifies all his efforts? You might also examine Winston's benchmarks of humanity further. Does the rest of the novel bear out the connections he makes in his initial journal entry between humanity and freedom of thought, personal relationships, and the right to participate in the creation of reality by voicing one's own opinions and memories? Do any of these elements come to stand out as more important than the others? Finally, you might also investigate whether Winston's point of view, including his definition of the essence of humanity, is shared by the narrator and endorsed by the book.

In any case, when you decide on a topic you would like to pursue, you should begin by examining the novel for other passages that seem relevant to your line of questioning. Closely read these passages, analyzing the language to see what it reveals to you, and then allow the results to lead you to other passages to examine as well. Once you have come to some insightful conclusion that you would like to serve as your thesis, you will then revisit your analyses, looking for the points that best support your thesis. These points will serve as the evidence supporting your claim in the body paragraphs of your essay. You will certainly not use every observation in your essay. Much of the close-reading work you do will only help you to refine your topic or will end up bringing up interesting but unrelated issues. All of this you will simply ignore in the actual construction of your essay as it has already served its purpose—helping you arrive at an interesting and thoughtful thesis.

Topics and Strategies

1984 is a deeply textured and complex novel that has been the focus of many critical studies in the decades since its publication. Despite the vast interpretive work that has been done so far, the novel's depth, coupled with your personal perspective, provides nearly unlimited perspectives from which to approach the work. The sample topics below will give you an idea of the types of essays that might be written about this novel; they will get you thinking and help you generate your own topic. Alternatively, you might be particularly intrigued by one of the sample topics and choose to focus your essay on the basic question it poses.

However, rather than attempting to write an essay that answers each subquestion provided in the sample topic in a linear fashion, you should use those questions as springboards to your own thinking, using them to help guide you back to the novel to find relevant passages to analyze, always recording your thoughts as you do this prewriting. Once you have generated some ideas and insights of your own, you are ready to leave the sample topic behind entirely and craft a thesis that will lay out your particular and distinct perspective on the topic.

Themes

When we talk about themes in literature, what we mean are the central ideas—the big ideas, if you will—that run through a work. One way to get at a work's themes is to ask yourself what a work makes you think about. What ideas does it force you to confront? Orwell's *1984* prompts contemporary American readers to think critically about many fundamental aspects of our lives that we typically take for granted, from the role of the government and its relationship to the populace to our freedom to express love. Thus, there are many themes in this novel that cry out to the modern reader for examination and discussion. The danger of such a rich thematic field is that the writer will try to cover too much ground. When you are thinking about writing an essay on a theme in *1984*, then, your first challenge will be to select the theme, or even one aspect of a particular theme, you want to examine and to push off to the side (perhaps for a later essay) all of the very interesting subtopics and details that intrigue you but that are not solidly connected to the theme you have chosen to investigate. Take government's role in society as an example. This theme could very easily lead you to discussion of the regulation of love or the disintegration of the family, and your essay could quickly get unwieldy as these topics could support essays in their own right. If you choose to focus on government, you will have to make a conscious effort to keep your focus on the party and its relationship to the people; you might certainly mention the loss of romantic love and the disintegration of the family unit as negative consequences of party control, but a discussion of the intricacies of these consequences likely belongs in another essay. One way to make sure you maintain a clear focus is to use the sample topics below to help you arrive at a clear thesis sentence that lays out the main point you want your essay to make. Then, if you make sure that all of the details and discussion in the body of your essay support that thesis sentence, you will know that your essay remains focused on its central point and does not veer off into tangential territory.

Sample Topics:

1. **Government's role in society:** The government is so overwhelming and all-controlling within the world of the novel that all serious consideration of the proper role of government is quashed. As readers, however, we have the opportunity to contrast the party to other forms of government and judge their respective success. What does the novel ultimately want to say about the relationship of government to the people under its control?

Undoubtedly, *1984* explores the potential consequences of a totalitarian regime on the hearts and minds of the populace. What would you say is the main thrust of its critique? Begin by thinking about what you would consider the ideal relationship between a government and its people. What should the functions of a government be? What fundamental rights should its citizens possess? How should the government and its citizens relate to one another? You might think about the answers to these questions in terms of different forms of government—how, for example, would the ideal democratic government differ from the ideal socialist government? What type of ideology is Oceania's government most similar to? What are the party's goals and motivations? What is the relationship of the party to the people, including party members and Proles? Keeping all this in mind, what would you say is Orwell's main message about the role of government and its relationship to its citizens? Does learning that Orwell was a fierce advocate of socialism affect either your reading of the novel or your concept of socialism?

2. **The essence of humanity:** According to Orwell's *1984*, what defines the human experience? Generally speaking, we tend to think of each human life as unique and precious. Does that hold true in Oceania? What other way is there to conceive of human life and human essence?

After Winston has been caught and tortured, O'Brien tells him that if he is indeed a man, then he must be the last man left. What do you think he means by this? What characteristics or traits are there in Winston that are missing in rank and file party members? What makes him different? Are these same traits present in Julia? You will also want to consider whether Winston ultimately loses his humanity. If you think he does, can you pinpoint the exact moment? What does he become if he ceases to be a man? What are the pros and cons of his life at his most "human"—when he is rebelling against the party—and his life after he emerges from O'Brien's custody as Big Brother's biggest supporter? What is Orwell trying to say about

the essence of humanity through Winston's story?

3. **Love:** What does the novel have to say about the nature of love under a repressive regime?

What might Winston and Julia's relationship have been like if they were both Proles? What if Winston had not been married before? Would they have enjoyed a long-term, satisfying romance, or is their connection too wrapped up in their mutual feelings about the party? Winston and Julia definitely see their relationship and the act of having sex as a political act—an act of rebellion against the party. Evaluate the success of this political act: What effect does Winston and Julia's relationship have on the political landscape? What effect might it have had if it had ended another way or if theirs was one of thousands of such liaisons? What possible political consequences could love as an act of rebellion produce? What effect might the politicizing of love have on the nature of love?

You might think about the current debate concerning same-sex marriages in context of this question. What is the government's role in regulating romantic relationships? Does it go too far, or not far enough, in the contemporary United States? Could same-sex relationships in contemporary society be seen as a political act similar to Winston and Julia's relationship in *1984*?

4. **Family ties:** If love is an expression of openness and is an expansive and inclusive human experience, what happens to it when expression is brutally restricted? Can love become an act of rebellion under such circumstances? What kind of commentary is Orwell making about the bonds of family in a totalitarian society?

Describe family life under Big Brother. You might take the Parsons, Winston's neighbors, as an example. How do the parents and children feel about each other? What are their relationships like? Are they an ideal party family? Why or why not? What function does the party see the family unit as playing? How might family relationships bolster or hinder party goals? Are Prole families different from party families? In what ways? What accounts for these differences? You might think as well about Winston's memories of his own family, particularly his mother and sister. How was his family, what little he remembers of it, different from the average party family of the present? Use this comparison to help you figure out how the meaning and function of family changes in the transition from a free to a controlled society.

5. **Hope or despair:** Analyze and evaluate the ending of *1984*. How does Orwell want to leave the reader feeling at the conclusion of the story?

According to Patrick Reilly, *1984* is not intended to prophesize an apocryphal ending for the world and leave its readers bereft of hope. Instead, the novel "paradoxically continues to fight for man even as it depicts the destruction of the last man alive.... Without minimizing the threat or underestimating the danger, we must believe, but not too easily, that we can foil Oceania. That is the human response and surely the one that Orwell sought" (Reilly 127–29). Reread the novel, paying particular attention to the later chapters, particularly the final scenes. Do you see the novel as "fight[ing] for man"? In what way? Do readers believe that Oceania can be foiled? Why or why not? Write an essay in which you disagree with Reilly's argument, agree with and extend it, or modify it to reflect what you have determined to be the novel's message about hope and the human condition.

Character

One interesting way to work toward the central ideas and meanings of a work is through a study of its characters. When doing so, you may opt to study a single character, whether major or minor, and the role he or she plays in the novel, or you may study a class of characters, such as female or male characters. Orwell's *1984* has many characters that would make for interesting character analysis essays. Of course, there is the main character Winston, but there is also Julia, O'Brien, the Proles, and the elusive Big Brother, among others. When writing about character, you will want to be sure to record everything you know about the character you are focusing on, including what he or she says, does, and thinks. You will also want to analyze how you receive that information. Through whom is it being filtered, and how does that affect it? Consider whether the narration seems to align itself with a particular character. Does the novel seem to be critical of or sympathetic to the particular character you are looking at? You will want to examine how the character changes, whether that change is for better or worse, and what prompts that change. Finally, you will want to determine what function the character is playing in terms of the novel's overall themes and messages.

Sample Topics:

1. **Winston:** How you perceive Winston carries great consequence in terms of the final message you take away from the novel. Is Winston a sort of everyman, an unlikely hero who evolves as the novel progresses? Or is he somehow extraordinary from the beginning, a born rebel who finally forsakes his values in the end? Analyze and evaluate main character Winston.

Begin by recording what you would consider Winston's most salient characteristics and the important details of his life. What do you know about his background? His habits? His disappointments? His hopes and dreams? Do you think Winston is a fairly typical party member or is there something unique about him that sparks his rebellion? If so, what might that be? Do you find Winston to be a likeable character? Do you sympathize with him? Why or why not? Finally, consider whether you would label Winston a hero. Granted, his attempt at rebellion fails, but he knew it was going to. He knows exactly how things will end when he first begins to write in his diary. Would you agree that the fact that Winston follows through with his rebellion in the face of certain torture and failure makes him a hero? Why or why not?

2. **Big Brother:** For someone who never appears and who may not even exist, Big Brother plays a pivotal role in Oceania and in the novel. Analyze and evaluate the character Big Brother.

Who is Big Brother? How is he portrayed? What does he look like? Sound like? Is he a real person? Is he a fictitious character? If so, why does the party create him? What does he represent? How does Winston feel about him? How do other party members and Proles feel about him? Think about what the novel would be like without Big Brother. What major function does he serve in the novel's overall messages and themes?

3. **O'Brien:** O'Brien plays the role of the foil to Winston. But is O'Brien a meaningful character beyond his role? Had O'Brien not been there, would someone else have stepped in and behaved identically? Can someone loyal to the party even be a fully-fledged person? Analyze and evaluate the character of O'Brien.

Record everything you know about O'Brien. What are O'Brien's ultimate goals and motivations? Trace Winston's perceptions of him from the beginning of the novel to the end. The novel insinuates that Winston really knows O'Brien's true allegiance from the beginning even though he pretends to himself that O'Brien is part of the rebellion. Why would Winston deceive himself this way? What is it about O'Brien that fascinates him so? What do you think the story would be like if it were told from O'Brien's point of view? What the story be like if it did not include O'Brien at all? What point do you think Orwell is trying to make by including this character in the novel?

4. **The Proles:** Analyze and evaluate the "Proles," the people outside of the party who make up 85 percent of Oceania's population.

Examine the scenes in which Winston observes the Prole woman singing from his room above the junk shop. What does he notice and appreciate about her? What does he appreciate about Proles in general? How are their lives different from the lives of party members? How do party members aside from Winston perceive Proles? Why do they not want these people to be indoctrinated into the party? What function do they serve in Oceania? Why does Winston think that they might hold the key to the party's destruction and the revival of a more authentic society? Do you think Winston is right? Is there any indication that a Prole rebellion against the party is possible or probable? If it were to occur, would it have a chance at success? Why or why not?

5. **Julia:** Analyze and evaluate the character of Julia.

Why does Julia participate so heartily in party activities? What are her true motives? What does Winston initially think of Julia? What does he envision her inner life to be like? What does he envision doing to her? How and why does his opinion change? What views do she and Winston share? Although the two undoubtedly discover a great deal of common ground between them, Julia's view of the party and her relationship to it fundamentally differ from Winston's. How exactly? What do you think accounts for that difference? How do each of them respond to the torture they suffer at the hands of the party? How is a woman's life under the party different from a man's? What do the roles of women and men seem to be in party society?

History and Context

No author writes in a vacuum, and no literary work fails to bear the marks of the times in which it was written. Some novels are intentionally set in earlier historical periods, while others comment very heavily on their contemporary times. As time passes, however, the time period in which the novel was produced shifts for readers from contemporary to historical, and many of the nuances of the work can only be fully appreciated if the reader is willing to do some historical research. *1984* is one of those novels that is closely associated with the period in history in which it was conceived and on which it comments. It would definitely benefit a student of the novel to read about the Russian Revolution and the evolution of communism and fascism that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century. You might start with Rex A. Wade's *The Russian Revolution, 1917* or Shelia Fitzpatrick's *The Russian Revolution*. Then, reread the novel in order to better understand the kinds of social changes that Orwell was reacting to with *1984*. Once you have a stronger sense of cultural context, you might decide to focus your entire essay on a topic having to do with the text's relationship to its own historical moment. You might investigate what society, group of people, or political philosophy Orwell is criticizing in his novel. Or, you might investigate what the novel has to say about Orwell's stance toward women's rights and gender equality, taking care to understand these issues through the lens of Orwell's times, as well as through our own.

Sample Topics:

1. **The Soviet Union, communism, and socialism:** What kind of commentary does *1984* ultimately make on communism and socialism?

Fredric Warburg writes that the government depicted in *1984* is a caricature of the Soviet Union. He writes:

For what is *1984* but a picture of man unmanned, of humanity without a heart, of a people without tolerance or civilization, of a government whose *sole* object is the maintenance of its absolute totalitarian power by every contrivance of cruelty. Here is the Soviet Union to the nth degree, a Stalin who never dies, a secret police with every device of modern technology. (103)

Orwell's own comments suggest that he is not targeting one society specifically but exploring what can happen when a philosophy he does support, socialism, is overtaken by one he does not, communism. He wants to be sure that people understand that his criticism of communism and fascism does not imply a critique of socialism. He writes:

My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive. (Orwell, "Letter" 502)

With these thoughts in mind, reread *1984* and do some background reading on the Russian Revolution. Do you agree with Warburg that Orwell's critique is aimed directly at the Soviet Union, or do you believe Orwell's comments that the critique was designed as more of a general warning for the entire world?

2. **Orwell's portrayal of women:** Analyze and evaluate Orwell's portrayal of women in *1984*.

Orwell's *1984* was published in 1949, a time in which both the United States and England were still largely patriarchal countries that afforded women only a modicum of rights and circumscribed social roles. Daphne Patai criticizes Orwell for simply recreating the patriarchal social order of his own society instead of creating a new paradigm and then failing even to explore the ramifications of the patriarchal social order on the women in his story and on the culture of Oceania as a whole. She writes:

The women in Orwell's narrative by and large appear as caricatures: They are Party secretaries, Party fanatics, Party wives like Katharine or the stereotypically helpless housewife Mrs. Parson.... [N]o female Inner Party members are mentioned. When Winston sees a man and woman in the canteen, he assumes that the woman is the man's secretary.... Although Orwell reveals male dominance to be a continuing feature of life in Oceania, he does not treat this as worthy of analysis and does not raise the issue of its role in a totalitarian

Do you agree with Patai's assertion that Oceania is fundamentally a patriarchal society? If so, do you also agree that Orwell, typically so capable of calling traditional social ideas into question, simply accepts this as matter of course and remains uninterested in the gender issues his novel, perhaps unintentionally, raises? Write an essay in which you counter, confirm and expand, or modify Patai's argument.

Philosophy and Ideas

All works of literature present us with ideological or philosophical elements to explore, but *1984* is especially rich in both. You might choose to examine the political philosophy of Oceania, called Ingsoc, or English socialism, for instance, discussing its principles, motivations, and faults. Or, you might elect to focus on what the novel has to say about the construction of memory and the difference between individual and collective memory. Then, there is also the question of the relationship between language and reality, and language and thought, which would make for a fascinating essay, as would a discussion of the concept of doublethink and its role in party endeavors. Although many of these topics tend to bleed into one another, you will need to narrow your focus to one of them so that the scope of your essay does not become unmanageable. Because the novel is so concerned with ideological and philosophical concerns and has so much to say about them, you will likely discover that you cannot even cover everything you'd like to say about your narrowed topic, such as Ingsoc, for example. Depending on the length of essay you are aiming for, you may have to narrow your topic further and explore a certain element of it, such as the effects of Ingsoc on family relationships, the sustainability of a society based on Ingsoc, or Ingsoc's justification of the methods used to maintain control of Oceania's population, for example. You will want to make sure that the body of your essay can fully support the argument you lay out in your thesis. If it cannot without going on too long, then you likely need to refine your argument further. If you wind up with an essay that adequately supports your thesis but is too short, then you will also need to work on your argument, covering additional ground or refining your argument, drawing out nuances and complications that need explaining and exploring.

Sample Topics:

1. **Memory:** What kind of commentary is the novel ultimately making about the construction, manipulation, and function of individual and collective memory?

How is memory constructed and maintained in the novel? Look for a minute at the memory of a party member. What happens to his or her memories of being at war with Eastasia when all references to such a war are obliterated by the party? How do party members handle the fact that history, and thus society's collective memory, is being constantly and regularly rewritten? Now think about Winston's memory. How are his memories different from the typical party members' memories, and, perhaps more importantly, why are they different? Does O'Brien ultimately gain control over Winston's memory? How does he manage this? All told, what does the novel have to say about the relationship of individual memory to collective or institutional memory? Is one more important than the other? More authentic? Do these conclusions apply in all societies to some degree or are they limited to the totalitarian world described in *1984*?

2. **The relationship of language to thought and the understanding of reality:** Analyze and evaluate Newspeak.

What is Newspeak? How is it different from regular English, or, as it is referred to in the novel, Oldspeak? Why is the party trying to cut down on the number of possible words in the language? Why is it trying to omit words for certain ideas? What do you think a society that speaks in perfected Newspeak would be like? How would it be different from contemporary American society? How would it be different even from Oceanic society as described in the novel? What is the novel saying about the way our language is connected to the way we understand the world? What is it saying about the connection of a private, inalienable self to the capacity for varied and unique expression?

3. **Ingsoc, or English socialism:** Analyze and evaluate the political philosophy of Oceania.

What are Ingsoc's basic principles and ideas? How did it develop? What are its goals? What kind of society does it perceive as ideal? What do you perceive as this philosophy's virtues and faults? What kind of a world does it actually create? What real historical society or government do Oceania and its political system most closely resemble? What, if anything, do you think Orwell was trying to say about that society through this novel? Or, do you think *1984* is more of a

philosophical exercise? If so, what is Orwell using Ingsoc to say about the nature of government and its relationship to the people under its purview?

4. **Doublethink:** What is the purpose of doublethink, and what effects does it have on Oceania and its inhabitants?

What exactly is doublethink and how does it function? Identify some examples of doublethink in the novel. What purpose does it serve? What qualities are necessary to be a good "doublethinker"? Which characters in the novel are particularly good at it? Why do you think Winston has difficulty with doublethinking? How does doublethink affect Oceania society? How does it affect individuals within that society? Do you think doublethink is a phenomenon isolated to fictional societies? Can you think of any cases in contemporary American society in which doublethink is alive and well?

Form and Genre

There is much to be discovered through an analysis of the form and genre of a particular piece. When an author sits down and begins to craft a new work, he or she is faced with an array of choices regarding the possible forms and genres into which the new work can fit. While occasionally a work is so revolutionary that it creates a new form or genre, for the most part, authors work within the confines of existing traditions. This gives readers something to consider: Why did the author choose this particular form, this particular, genre, for this work? And how does this work fit in with all the previous examples from this genre? Is the author commenting on the form or genre? Trying to change it in some way? Somehow conversing with his or her predecessors? Therefore, thinking about the building blocks of a novel—the basic choices the author makes in the construction of the work—as well as how it relates to other, similar works, can be very illuminating. In the case of *1984*, you might think about several of Orwell's choices, including the style of narration he employs and the fact that he interrupted the narrative flow with excerpts from a book within the fictional universe. You might also examine his work in relationship to other dystopic novels; such an exercise will help you to figure out Orwell's influences as well as to identify the original ideas he brought to the genre.

Sample Topics:

1. **Omniscient narrator:** Analyze and evaluate Orwell's narrator of *1984*.

Think about the narrating voice that is presenting the story. What kind of information is it privy to? Does it simply portray events as they unfold or does it get inside the thoughts and feelings of some or all of the characters? Does the narrative seem sympathetic to Winston? To Big Brother? What makes you think so? To help you figure out what bias the narrative might have, think about what the novel would be like if the story were told by Winston, or Julia, or Goldstein. What elements might have been left out? What new details might have been included? What would have been told differently?

2. **Goldstein's book:** Why does Orwell incorporate portions of Goldstein's book into the narrative? What pragmatic and/or thematic functions does this method serve?

What was O'Brien's motive in getting the book to Winston? What function does the book serve for the party? How do Winston and Julia react to Goldstein's book? Rather than just telling readers that Winston is reading such a book and perhaps summarizing what he is learning, Orwell actually includes portions of Goldstein's book as Winston reads it. What does this literary device allow Orwell to accomplish? What information is transmitted to the reader through Goldstein's book? How would it be different if this same information were presented through the narrator instead? What happens to the flow of the narrative and the reading experience when the pieces of Goldstein's text are encountered? What do you think Orwell was trying to accomplish with this technique and do you feel he was successful?

3. **Dystopia:** What kind of commentary is Orwell making about human nature or the nature of government by creating a dystopia like Oceania?

1984 can be categorized with many other works of literature that present some version of a dystopia, characterized as a generally miserable human civilization, the opposite of an ideal society, or utopia. Do some research into literary dystopias—you might begin with Keith M. Booker's *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* or *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*—and then reread *1984* to see how it fits in. What makes Oceania a dystopia? Are the party members trying to create an ideal society and creating a monstrosity instead, or is idealism not even in their

mindset? How is Oceania different from other dystopic realms? What do you think was Orwell's purpose in creating it?

Language, Symbols, and Imagery

Authors can pack a lot of meaning into the language, symbols, and imagery they use. In this way, they convey complicated and nuanced ideas without ever expressly stating them. For this reason, it can be exciting and rewarding to choose a certain element of language or a recurring symbol or image and to analyze it carefully to see what it reveals about the novel's overall themes and meanings. In *1984*, there are many symbols or images you might choose, but two especially interesting ones are the ubiquitous telescreens and Winston's recurring dreams. For either of these topics, you would need to start by identifying key passages that feature these elements and performing close readings on them. You would then use your analysis to draw a conclusion as to what new insight about the novel can be gained through a careful examination of that particular symbol or image. That conclusion would serve as your thesis sentence, which you would then support by presenting the most compelling points from your analysis in the body paragraphs of the essay.

Sample Topics:

1. **Telescreen:** What does the telescreen come to symbolize in the novel?

How is the telescreen described? What are its functions? How do various characters feel about it? Why do you think inner party members are allowed to turn their screens off for brief periods of time? What do you think the screens come to symbolize or represent in the novel? What would the book be missing without them?

2. **Dreams:** What commentary is the novel ultimately making about the function and power of dreams, particularly in an oppressive society?

Because Big Brother prevents him from expressing doubt or uncertainty in writing or speech, Winston's questions and disappointments come through in his dreams. What do you think his frequent dreams about his mother and sister signify? How about his dreams of O'Brien? How does Winston interpret his dreams? Does he come to understand their meaning and significance? Do you think Winston is the only party member to experience dreams of this sort? What does the persistence of Winston's dreams have to say about the ability of the party to control its members' thoughts and perception of reality?

Compare and Contrast Essays

Comparing and contrasting can be one of the most fruitful ways to approach writing an essay. Setting an element—a book or character, for example—against another element—a different book by the same or another author, another character, or a possible source for that character in real life—can bring to the forefront meaningful elements that might not have been easy to spot in isolation. Just like any other type of essay, however, a compare and contrast essay requires a great deal of preliminary work, much of which does not show up in the final product. You will spend a fair amount of time exploring the similarities and differences between multiple elements and then examining them for meaningful patterns, and arriving at a significant conclusion that will be the thesis of your essay before you can begin actually writing the essay. For example, a comparison and contrast essay about *1984* and *Brave New World* would not simply list all the ways that the two novels are similar and different. Instead, it would use these similarities or differences to say something new and interesting about one or both of the novels in question. Such an essay might argue, for instance, that the novels demonstrate that the key to controlling people and gaining their total loyalty to the government and its principles is destroying meaningful relationships such as romantic and familial bonds. Such an essay would explore the various ways that the governments orchestrate the loss of these relationships and the effects of this loss on individuals in the society, specifically the main characters Bernard and Winston. It might also discuss what this fact—that the loss of relationships makes humans susceptible to control—says about the nature of human beings and their basic needs. Such an essay would not, however, need to include all of the similarities and differences between the two novels unrelated to the thesis that were noted in the initial prewriting and brainstorming stages.

Sample Topics:

1. **1984 and Brave New World:** Compare and contrast these two visions of a totalitarian society. What do they have in

common? What makes each vision distinct?

How are people controlled in each of the societies? What methods does the government employ to get its citizens to do what it wants them to? What are the governments' overall goals? What type of society is the government trying to create? What are the governments' opinions on family, love, and sex?

Once you have examined the social and ideological frameworks of the two novels, you will want to focus specifically on their protagonists. Think about the main characters in these two works, Bernard and Winston. What makes them different from the average person in their respective societies? What traits, if any, do they share? Next, you will want to examine the notes you have generated comparing and contrasting *1984* and *Brave New World* to see what patterns or meaningful differences you can find.

2. **Goldstein and Trotsky:** Compare and contrast the fictional Goldstein with Leon Trotsky.

Begin by recording everything you know about Goldstein. What do you know about his history and ideological stance? Read the portions of *1984* that are purported to be selections from Goldstein's book given to Winston by O'Brien. What are the main ideas outlined there? Within the universe of the novel, do you think that this is truly Goldstein's book or is it a fabrication created by the party? Does Goldstein, in fact, exist? Has he ever existed? What function does his legend serve for party members? For those who seek to rebel? Once you've done your examination of Goldstein, you'll want to do some background reading on Leon Trotsky, his role in the Russian Revolution, and his relationship to Lenin. You might start with Ian Thatcher's biography *Trotsky*. What similarities can you find between Goldstein and Trotsky? What significant differences? You might also want to compare and contrast Trotsky's work *The Revolution Betrayed* with the fictional Goldstein's *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*.

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