

# 1984: ORWELL'S WORLD AND OURS



## **1. COURSE DESCRIPTION**

When George Orwell wrote *1984*, the year that gave the book its title and setting lay 35 years ahead. Today, it is just as far in the past, and yet Orwell's prophecies seem more relevant than ever. In 2017, when a Trump spokesperson debuted the concept of "[alternative facts](#)" to an incredulous public, *1984* raced to the top of the best-seller charts. In 2013, the book saw a similar resurgence of popularity following revelations of a [secret mass surveillance program](#) that allowed the NSA to gather the data of American citizens. Even if you've never read the book you've probably heard – maybe even used – some of its iconic phrases: *Big Brother*, *Thought Police*, *doublethink*, *thoughtcrime*, *Newspeak*, or  $2+2=5$ . Orwell invented all of this because he wanted to give his readers a handle on what was happening in the world. He feared that a new species of totalitarian governments wielding new forms of power – power over the body, the mind, and perhaps even reality itself – would come to dominate and dehumanize their citizens, and he believed that only a conscious choice to prevent this would redeem the future.



Much has changed since then, including the fall of the totalitarian regimes that inspired the novel, and yet it seems we still cannot put Orwell’s premonitions safely behind us – so much so that Orwell’s own name has become shorthand for the sinister political and technological trends he warned against.

 **Or·wel·li·an**  
/ôr'welēən/  
*adjective*

characteristic of the writings of George Orwell, especially with reference to his dystopian account of a future totalitarian state in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.  
"a frightening view of an Orwellian future"

**In this course, we’ll explore the enduring significance of *1984* from three distinct angles.**

In the first unit, we will grapple with the text itself, close-reading key passages from the novel and using them to explore the underappreciated nuances of Orwell’s masterpiece. Even (dare I say, especially!) if you’ve read *1984* before, you will find the book’s power to shock and unnerve remains just as potent on a second or third reading.

In the second unit, we will consider the text in its historical context, drawing evidence from Orwell’s non-fiction writing to add depth and sophistication to our analysis. By considering the essays that Orwell wrote in the decade leading up to *1984* – many of which are iconic works of literature in their own right – we can retrace the intellectual and political journey that led Orwell to issue his infamous dystopian prophecy.

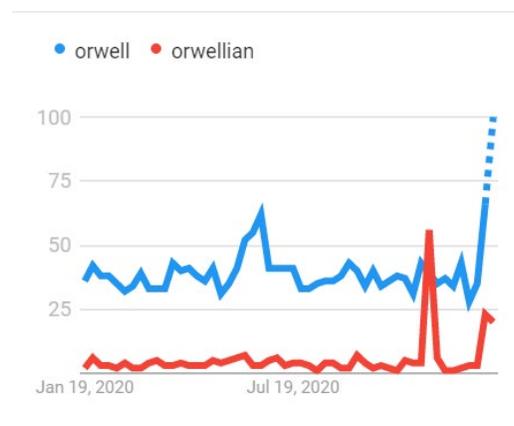
In the third unit, we will consider whether and to what extent Orwell’s novel still illuminates *our* future. You’ll have the chance to pursue independent research on key Orwellian themes such as authoritarianism, post-truth, censorship, and surveillance, in order to see how the arguments of contemporary thought leaders have updated Orwell’s insights for the twenty-first century.

## **II. WHY READ 1984... IN 2021?**

For one thing, you won’t be alone. *1984* has spent the entire year in in the Top 100 of Amazon’s “Literature and Fiction” Best Sellers list (currently #63), and even briefly held the [#1 position](#) – it’s still #1 on the “Political Fiction” list. Ever since the storming of the capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, there has been a major surge of interest in Orwell and the “Orwellian.” Readers have found *1984* instructive both as to the causes of the insurrection and the ensuing debates about misinformation, censorship, and freedom of speech.

This isn’t totally unusual. Orwell’s novel is always echoing through the headlines in one way or another. It’s a true classic in this regard.

Interest over time  
United States. Past 12 months.



But... just because everybody is always *talking* about *1984* doesn't mean they've *read* their Orwell as closely as they should. *Misreading* (or simply not reading) *1984* has as long a tradition as reading it – Anthony Burgess, of [A Clockwork Orange](#) fame, quipped in 1978 that, “American college students have said, ‘Like *1984*, man,’ when asked not to smoke pot in the classroom or advised gently to do a little reading.” At the very least, taking this course can help you avoid being one of those college students!

## Society Is Turning Into Exactly What I Bet the Book *1984* Is About



[Don't be this guy!](#)

Not that young readers are the only ones who like to invoke Orwell out of context whenever they feel put upon by the powers that be. Part of what prompted the latest uptick in Orwell talk were Tweets like these...



**Josh Hawley** ✓  
@HawleyMO

...

My statement on the woke mob at [@simonschuster](#)

This could not be more Orwellian. Simon & Schuster is canceling my contract because I was representing my constituents, leading a debate on the Senate floor on voter integrity, which they have now decided to redefine as sedition. Let me be clear, this is not just a contract dispute. It's a direct assault on the First Amendment. Only approved speech can now be published. This is the Left looking to cancel everyone they don't approve of. I will fight this cancel culture with everything I have. We'll see you in court.

6:42 PM · Jan 7, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone



**Donald Trump Jr.** ✓  
@DonaldTrumpJr

...

We are living Orwell's *1984*. Free-speech no longer exists in America. It died with big tech and what's left is only there for a chosen few.

This is absolute insanity!



**Jennifer Jacobs** ✓ @JenniferJJacobs · Jan 8

TWITTER PERMANENTLY SUSPENDS @realDonaldTrump account.  
[twitter.com/TwitterSafety/...](#)

[Show this thread](#)

7:10 PM · Jan 8, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

It is it really “Orwellian” when a politician gets banned from Twitter or loses a book deal following an event like the attack on the Capitol? Or are these fair consequences for reckless and misleading political speech? They’ve provoked some lively discussion about what, [if anything](#), “Orwellian” means, what exactly Orwell meant to warn us against, and whether the uses of the terms Orwellian above are [actually themselves Orwellian](#)! (Is this *Orwellianception*?!)

JANUARY 11, 2021

WE ARE LIVING IN ORWELL’S 1984. I THINK. I DON’T KNOW. I DIDN’T READ THE BOOK. WHO’S ORWELL?

by ELI GROBER

[Don't be this guy either!](#)



MehGyver  
@TheAndrewNadeau

him: \*pointing at consequences for launching an assault\* orwellian!

me: that—no

him: \*pointing at not getting what he wants all the time\* orwellian

me: still no

him: \*tears in his eyes, pointing at picture of a llama\* orwellian?

me: sure, champ. that’s orwellian

11:30 · 09 Jan 21 · Twitter for iPhone

### **III. THE TRUTH ABOUT ORWELL**

Taking this course will give you the chance to cut through the hype and get to know Orwell in his own words. It begins with a close consideration of *1984* itself. As Orwell’s novel has become more infamous and influential, it has also become more difficult to read and to understand on its own terms. For our first few weeks together, we’ll try to cut through the layers of myth and misreading so that we can, as Dorian Lynskey writes in [The Ministry of Truth](#), experience *1984* “as a book and not just as a useful cache of memes.”<sup>1</sup> Whether you are re-reading the novel or encountering it for the first time, this unit will ask you to develop your own interpretation of Orwell’s work through close analysis, a fundamental skill of argumentative writing. Rather than assuming we all know what Orwell meant, we will challenge ourselves to read what he actually wrote with new eyes, and in doing so, begin to unravel the mysteries of a novel that is stranger, richer, and in many ways even more unsettling than its popular reputation suggests.



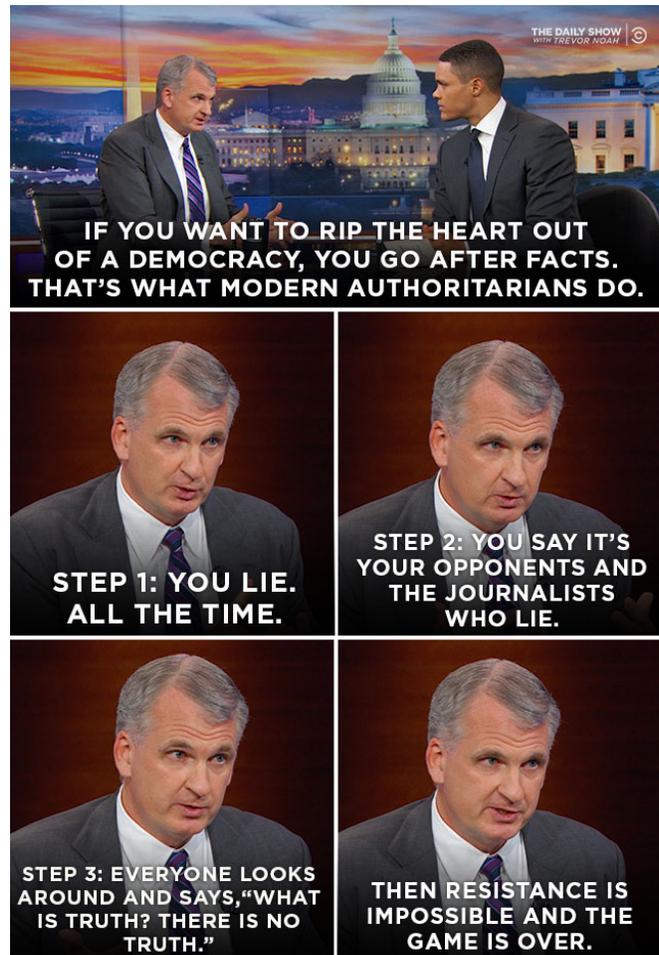
Following our initial encounter with *1984*, we’ll spend the second unit of the course pursuing a second interpretative strategy, this time, one which locates the novel within the historical context of the 1940s and specifically within Orwell’s thinking about themes such as totalitarianism, socialism,

<sup>1</sup> Lynskey, Dorian. 2019. *The Ministry of Truth: The Biography of George Orwell’s 1984* (Doubleday).

power, literature, truth, and freedom. What led Orwell to issue his dark prophecy? Did he believe that the totalitarian future of *1984* was inevitable, or did he hold some hope that it could be averted? Landmark essays such as “[Notes on Nationalism](#),” “[Politics and the English Language](#)” and “[The Prevention of Literature](#)” are worth reading on their own merits, but they also provide clues as to the meaning of *1984*, as they show Orwell grappling with many of the novel’s key themes in real time, with real world stakes. Together, they allow us to reconstruct the road to *1984* and forge new perspectives on the historical and political significance of the novel.

To conclude the course, we’ll turn our focus to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and ask what *1984* can tell us about our own future. It’s easy enough to declare Orwell “[a man of our time](#),” as Richard Bradford’s new biography, does.<sup>2</sup> Newspaper columnists now debate the accuracy of Orwell’s minor and major predictions, breathlessly speculating as to whether Orwell would have [supported Brexit](#) or [used a smartphone](#). But what happens if we stop treating Orwell as a secular prophet and start asking more nuanced questions how his words and ideas can illuminate our times?

Today’s thought leaders have recommended *1984* as a guide to any number of distressing contemporary developments. Michiko Kakutani, for example, has called *1984* a “[must-read](#)” for its exploration of a world where truth has been marginalized by political propaganda.<sup>3</sup> Others have found Orwell’s writing prescient with regards to the global resurgence of authoritarianism, the normalization of state and corporate surveillance, and the political role of the dissident writer. In the third unit of our class, perspectives drawn from journalists like [Masha Gessen](#), scholars like [Timothy Snyder](#) and [Shoshanna Zuboff](#), and contemporary dystopian fiction such as [Black Mirror](#), will provide the launching point for your own original research essay on the “Orwellian” theme of your choice.



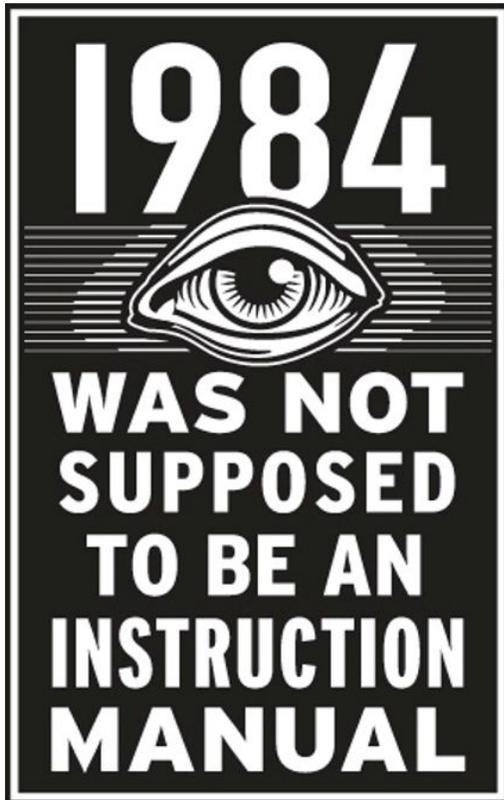
[Historian Timothy Snyder discusses the dynamics of authoritarianism with Trevor Noah](#)

<sup>2</sup> Bradford, Richard. 2020. *Orwell: A Man of Our Time* (Bloomsbury).

<sup>3</sup> Kakutani, Michiko. 2017. “Why *1984* is a 2017 Must-Read,” *New York Times*, Jan 20. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/books/why-1984-is-a-2017-must-read.html>

## **IV. THE TRUTH ABOUT EXPOS**

Like all Expos courses, *1984: Orwell's World and Ours* is an intensive writing seminar that involves pre-writing exercises, draft conferences, workshops, and revisions. It's not easy, and it's not meant to be. But if you stick with it, you'll see your writing get stronger, clearer, and more persuasive. And in this particular course, you'll get to hone your skills writing with, about, and sometimes against Orwell – one of the greatest essayists ever to pick up a pen. Orwell's work is full of advice and examples for aspiring writers, so you'll be getting a master class.



But Expos isn't just a series of writing assignments. At the core of the class is the seminar itself, where we read, write, and discuss together as a supportive community of learners. Teaching this course in Spring 2020 and 2021, I was amazed by the range of perspectives and interpretations the students brought to the table. They found details in *1984* that I had never noticed in all my years of study and wrote powerful essays inspired by Orwell's thinking. As the pandemic shook our society and scattered the class around the world, many students found Orwell a prescient guide to the tumultuous new reality.

*1984* is one of my favorite books to discuss with students because it asks us to think about our shared future and the steps we must take today if we want to fight for a better tomorrow. It also happens that this kind of speculative fiction is a major personal and academic obsession of mine. My biggest and longest-running project is a book manuscript called *Dystopia and Political Imagination in the Twentieth Century*. If

you want to get a taste of what it's about, you can check out my book chapter, "[Dystopia, Apocalypse, and Other Things to Look Forward To](#)," which tries to untangle the hidden messages of hope in frightening future fictions by writers like Margaret Atwood and Cormac McCarthy. Or my latest publication, "[At the Heart of Human Politics](#)," which explores the way "[climate fiction](#)" might influence our collective response to the climate crisis by helping us imagine possible futures.

If you have any questions about the course, feel free to shoot me a message at [mjbenjamincole@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:mjbenjamincole@fas.harvard.edu). I'd be happy to exchange e-mails or set up a time to talk on Zoom. I hope you'll consider making *1984: Orwell's World and Ours*, part of your first-year experience!