

INSTRUCTOR

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OFFICE HOURS

Tu/Thurs: 3-4PM

EXPOS 20

1984: ORWELL'S WORLD AND OURS

Fall 2021

Tuesdays & Thursdays
12:00 PM – 1:15 PM (206),
1:30 PM – 2:45 PM (207)

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION

When George Orwell wrote *1984*, the year that gave the book its title and setting lay 35 years ahead. Today, it is 35 years 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 behind us.

In this course, we examine the enduring significance of *1984* from three different 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 scholars and thought leaders have updated Orwell's insights for the twenty-first century.

UNIT 1: 1984

The course 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 hype, 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.”¹ 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. After developing your own line of questioning and analysis, you will write a **5-6 page** essay in which you argue for your interpretation of *1984*. This essay will count for **25%** of your final grade.

UNIT 2: ORWELL'S WORLD...

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, 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 open up new perspectives on the historical and political significance of the novel. After drawing evidence from Orwell's writings, you will write a **6-8 page** essay in which you compare Orwell's non-fiction with his fiction, using concepts from the former as a “lens” to explore the latter. This essay will count for **25%** of your final grade.

UNIT 3: ... AND OURS

To conclude the course, we'll turn our focus to the 21st 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.² “[Orwellian](#)” has become one of the most widely used and abused adjectives in our political culture. Newspaper columnists 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?

¹ Lynskey, Dorian. 2019. *The Ministry of Truth: The Biography of George Orwell's 1984* (Doubleday).

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

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.¹ 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. After assembling and analyzing sources on the Orwellian theme of your choice, you will write an **8-10 page** argumentative essay and share your findings with the class. The essay will count for **30% of your final grade**, while your **proposal and annotated bibliography**, due at the midpoint of the unit, will count for **10%**.

II. ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Understandably, first year-students have lots of questions about how their work will be graded in college generally and in Expos specifically. This section of the syllabus is meant to demystify the grading process, so you have a better understanding of what goes into your grade on each assignment and at the end of the course.

GRADING BREAKDOWN

Unit One (Interpretive) Essay: **25%**
Unit Two (Comparative) Essay: **25%**
Unit Three Essay Proposal and Bibliography: **10%**
Unit Three (Research) Essay: **30%**
Engagement & Participation: **10%**

WHAT'S IN A GRADE?

We'll have plenty of conversations over the semester about what your grades do (and don't) mean. But you should start with the Harvard College Handbook page on [Grades and Honors](#), which explains the basics of the College grading scale. You'll get specific rubrics for each major assignment, but if you want some general insight into how you should interpret your grades, consider the following:

Broadly speaking, your essays are graded by how well they implement the Elements of Academic Argument taught in Expos. The most important criteria have to do with **thesis and argument, structure, evidence and analysis, sources, and style (clarity)**. We will discuss each of these in depth throughout the semester, as well as the elements that support them. With that in mind, you can think of grades along the following general lines:

An 'A' grade (A/A-) means that the essay is excellent (*not* perfect) and complete (it has a fully realized beginning, middle and end; it addresses the questions/issues that it raises). An "A" essay skillfully expresses an argumentative thesis and adeptly handles all of the core Elements of Academic Writing central to the given assignment. An "A-" essay will do this to a slightly less successful degree, typically having one important Element of Academic (i.e. thesis, evidence, structure) argument that needs significant improvement.

A 'B' grade (B-/B/B+) means that the essay is strong and succeeds in many ways but presents two or more key Elements of Academic argument that still need significant work. This means that while a "B"-range essay offers an engaging and intelligent discussion, certain aspects don't yet live up to the rest of the essay or to the promise the essay offers. A "B+" paper might, for instance, offer a partial thesis and some

¹ 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>

good work with evidence, but could use substantial development in both areas and/or presents some shortcomings in other areas. A “B” paper might need substantial further revision in these areas and others.

A ‘C’ grade (C-/C/C+) means that the essay possesses potential, but in its current form is flawed, holding the essay back in a substantial way. “C”-range essays require significant further revision in all or most pertinent Elements.

REGRADE POLICY

While good faith questions about the outcome of your assignment are welcome, especially if they are geared toward improving future work, I am not interested in litigating grades after the fact. If you believe a paper was not graded fairly or accurately, you may submit a **one page letter** explaining (i) as you understand the feedback provided, why did your paper receive the grade it received? and (ii) why do you think the paper deserves a higher grade *based on the content of the paper and the criteria/rubric provided?* At that point I will determine whether to regrade the paper myself or to submit it (anonymously) to another Preceptor for external review. For more on grading, see the handy chart made by my colleague, Professor Gold:

GRADING	
IS	ISN'T
A specific metric A measure of how successfully you’ve accomplished a specific writing & thinking task and met its particular criteria (Elements of Academic Writing). Paying careful attention to in-class discussions, feedback, response papers, and the drafting process will set you up for greater success.	The rule A measure of your self-worth, value, full intellectual ability or potential, or a determinant of your future. It is also not a direct measure of effort <i>per se</i> (how many hours you spent on an assignment, how many times you came to office hours– though all of that can help!)
Additive You <i>earn</i> points based on how well you’ve mastered the core skills (Elements) of each assignment through the writing, feedback, and revision processes.	Deductive You don’t <i>lose</i> points from a singular, idealized paper. Each student is striving toward their own “ideal” paper based on their strengths & weaknesses and drafting/revision processes.
More stringent with each assignment The skills you learn in Unit 1 should be implemented and improved upon in Unit 2, etc. Assignments are designed to increase in complexity and thus difficulty, both to introduce you to a variety of writing genres/assignments types you might encounter at Harvard and to challenge you.	Always linear Writing is a (often hard) process and not necessarily an even one. Some people may excel at certain assignments and vice versa; some types of assignments may be more familiar to you than others. Some units may be more challenging personally or academically than others.

<p style="text-align: center;">A reflection of your own original work</p> <p>“Original” work is not about saying something no one else has ever said. Original work derives from your own voice, insights, and efforts in a way that engages and educates reader. It may be informed by appropriate sources of collaboration: class discussion, writing center sessions, and responsible use of sources; it is free of any type of plagiarism.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">A reflection of perfection/failure</p> <p>No paper is perfect, even those by the best writers. No paper is a failure, unless it is not turned in or it is plagiarized, which might incur some form of disciplinary action (depending on case and severity). Each draft and revision are steps in an ongoing writing and research process that will continue beyond this class.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Criteria-Based</p> <p>The core Elements central to each essay are noted on the assignment sheet; grades indicate how well you meet them. While content is important, this is a writing class. Having an exceptional, exciting idea but an unclear, missing, or partial articulation of that idea/thesis won’t meet the designated criteria.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Consistent Across Disciplines/ Courses</p> <p>Different courses, profs, TAs, etc. have different approaches to feedback/grading, especially when it comes to writing. Expos courses may prioritize writing criteria that other courses and disciplines may not. Your best bet is to check with your course head or consult the syllabus.</p>

III. COURSE POLICIES

The following portions of the syllabus describe the course policies on matters related to attendance, completion and submission of work, as well as collaboration and academic honesty. Please familiarize yourself with the course policies and let me know as soon as possible if any of these policies need to be clarified.

ATTENDANCE

The Writing Program attendance policy is intended to make sure that you get everything you can out of your Expos course. Because Expos has fewer class hours than some other courses; because the course is largely discussion-based; and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential to your learning in the course.

While I of course encourage you to be present every day in class, you are allowed two unexcused absences for the semester with no consequence. Some absences (religious holidays and medical situations) are automatically considered excused; some family circumstances may also be counted as excused absences. If you miss two unexcused classes, I will ask you to meet with me to discuss any issues that may be keeping you from attending, and to advise you on your plan for catching up on the missed work. If you miss a third class, you will be required to meet with your Resident Dean about those absences, so that your Dean can give you any support you may need to help you get back on track in the class. Missing four classes--the equivalent of two full weeks of the semester--puts you at risk for missing crucial material necessary to complete your work. Unless there is a medical or other emergency issue preventing consistent engagement with the class, students who miss four classes will receive a formal warning that they are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

In the case of a medical problem, you should contact me before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours. In the case of a medical absence, you may be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official to confirm that absence as excused; protracted or repeated illness will require

such documentation. Absences because of special events or extracurricular involvement are not excused absences. If such circumstances lead you to want to miss more than two unexcused absences, you must petition the Associate Director of the Writing Program for permission.

COMPLETION OF WORK

Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course (not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind). If you are unable to complete your work on time due to medical or family issues, please contact me before the deadline to discuss both the support you might need as well as a possible new arrangement for your deadline. Communication about your situation is essential so that we can determine how best to help you move forward. If we have not already discussed your situation and you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit, you will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements and asking you to meet with me and/or your Resident Dean to make a plan for catching up on your work. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and if you have not documented a medical problem or been in touch with your Dean about other circumstances, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

If you think you will require some flexibility in deadlines or participation in the course for reasons of a documented disability, please schedule a meeting with me early in the semester so we can discuss appropriate accommodations. (To be eligible for such accommodations, you need to have provided documentation to the Accessible Education Office ahead of time. Please let me know if you are unfamiliar with that process.) The Accessible Education Office works closely with Expos courses, and we will develop a plan that is appropriate for your needs. Please note that it is always your responsibility to consult with me as the need for those accommodations arises.

POLICY ON ELECTRONIC SUBMISSIONS

You will submit your work electronically this semester through our Canvas site. As you send or upload each document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document in a form compatible with [choose your favorite program here – the more explicit you are about programs or file names, the better]. It is also your responsibility to ensure that the file you are sending is not corrupted or damaged. If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, the essay will be subject to a late penalty.

POLICY ON COLLABORATION

As in many academic situations, our Expos class will be a setting that involves frequent collaboration--we will develop ideas together through class discussion, peer review, and draft workshops. The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). It is a form of academic integrity to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay; you can do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the *Student Handbook*, "Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading." However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden. The course Capstone project will be a collaborative effort, and we will talk further as we begin the project about which aspects of that work can be shared and which should be done individually.

POLICY ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

One of the essential elements of the Expos curriculum is the work we do on effective source use, appropriate acknowledgement of sources, and expectations for citing sources in academic writing. In each unit, we will work on strategies for working with the ideas of other authors and sources, and how to develop your own ideas in response to them. Most forms of academic writing involve building on the ideas of others, contributing ideas of your own, and signaling clearly for readers where each idea comes from. This complex relationship with sources is part of our work through the whole semester, and you should always feel free to ask me questions about this material.

As we become familiar with the expectations of an academic audience, we will also work on strategies to avoid errors in citation and unintentional plagiarism. As with all your courses, the expectation in Expos is that all the work that you submit for this course must be your own. That work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action.