

Instructor

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Office Hours

Wednesdays: 3-4PM
CGIS Knafel Cafe

Expos 20

1984: Orwell's World and Ours

Spring 2020

CGIS Knafel K107

Mondays & Wednesdays

12:00 PM -1:15 PM,

1:30 PM – 2:45 PM

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 will shed light on the enduring significance of *1984* by

investigating the novel 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. In the second unit, we will look at the text in its historical context, drawing evidence from Orwell's essays, journalism, and letters to add depth and sophistication to our analysis. In the third unit, we will consider whether and to what extent Orwell's novel still illuminates our future. Students will pursue independent research on key Orwellian themes such as authoritarianism, post-truth, 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. During this time, the class will also collaborate on a video time capsule to transmit our own predictions, hopes, and fears to the Harvard students of the future.

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 challenge 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 **20%** 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 totalitarianism, socialism, power, literature, freedom, among other key themes. What led Orwell to issue this dark prophecy? Did he believe that the totalitarian future was inevitable, or did he hold some hope that it could be averted? By reading several of Orwell's essays – many of which are considered classics in their own right – we will 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 the former to shed new light on the latter. This essay will count for **30%** 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* has anything to 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 Today, newspaper columnists

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).

debate the accuracy of Orwell's minor and major predictions, breathlessly debating whether Orwell would have supported Brexit, or whether he would use a smartphone. But what happens if we stop treating Orwell as a secular prophet and start asking more nuanced questions about whether and how his words and ideas can illuminate our times? Certainly, many of today's thought leaders have recommended the novel as a guide to any number of distressing contemporary developments. Michiko Kakutani 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, or the normalization of state and corporate surveillance. Such perspectives will provide the launching point for your own original research project and essay. After assembling and analyzing sources on the Orwellian theme of your choice, you will write an **8-10 page** research essay. This essay will count for **35% of your final grade**.

During the final unit, we will also collaborate on a video capstone project. We'll work together with the [Bok Learning Lab](#) to record our own predictions, hopes, and fears for the 21st century, addressing them to the Harvard students of the future. Your contributions to the class project will be a major component of your participation grade (see below).

II. 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

Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. If you are absent without medical excuse more than twice, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade. On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation. This letter will also be sent to your Resident Dean, so the College can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course.

Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact your preceptor before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours: otherwise you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Resident Dean. Absences because of extra-curricular events such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences. If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences, in which case you should notify me in advance. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two absence limit, you should contact your Resident Dean and you must directly petition the Expository Writing Senior Preceptor, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary

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>

circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

Participation

Because the goal of Expos is to help students improve as individual writers through conversation with both their instructors and their peers, it will only yield its greatest rewards for students who participate actively in all exercises, discussions, and workshops. Though the vast majority of your grade in the class will be determined by the quality of your final papers, participation is a graded component of this course. Only students who contribute actively to class discussions and workshops, and who complete all response papers, class exercises, and revisions thoughtfully and thoroughly will receive full credit for participation. **Your participation in class discussions and workshops, as well as your contributions to the capstone project, will determine 15% of your final grade.**

Note that you will have opportunities to write and revise during class, and you may want to bring your computer/device for this purpose. However, laptops, tablets, phones, and other electronic devices should remain unseen and unheard, except when being used for a class activity (you will know when this is happening).

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. Late essays will be penalized by one third of a letter grade for each day past the initial deadline (so a paper that would have earned an A would get an A- if it is one day late, a paper that would have earned an A- would get a B if it is two days late, a paper that would have earned would get a C if it is three days late, etc.). Extensions may be granted with my approval, however, in the absence of an emergency, extensions must be requested no less than 24 hours before the deadline, no extension of more than 48 hours will be granted, and no student will receive more than one extension during the semester. In the event that you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by its posted due date, you will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements and establishing a final deadline. The letter will be copied to your Resident Dean. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by the final deadline, and you have not documented a medical problem or other serious emergency, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

Electronic Submission of Work

You will submit at least some of your work electronically this semester. As you send or upload each document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document in a form compatible with Microsoft Word. 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.

Collaboration

This course will provide opportunities for you to improve your work through collaboration with your peers. At the same time, you are responsible for completing your own writing and revision exercises on your own. All written work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

On the other hand, 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). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to 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."

Academic Honesty

Throughout the semester we'll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment and are acknowledged appropriately. 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. You will be required to affirm that your work meets the standards of the Honor Code when you submit each of your drafts and graded essays.

III. Final Grade

Your final grade for the course will be determined as follows:

Unit 1 Essay (Final draft):	20%
Unit 2 Essay (Final draft):	30%
Unit 3 Essay (Final draft):	35%
Participation (Including Capstone):	15%