



## **Orwell's Dystopian Inequality: Fact or Fiction?**

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### **Introduction**

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“Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimeters in your skull” (1). These words are part of the musings of a fictional character, Winston Smith, in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*. Winston lives in a totalitarian, quasi-oligarchic London society where Big Brother is always watching and erasing people from existence is the norm. This concept mirrors the main theme of my unit, which approaches the novel with an examination of Orwell’s portrayal of future socio-political structures that actually have turned out to be not too far from the truth--especially in their representation of how those structures have thrived on the inequality of the people living among them.

### **School Context**

I have taught at Mt. Pleasant High School for five years (six if you include my yearlong residency in which I student taught at MP), which has been the entirety of my teaching career. California has the California School Dashboard, which “provides parents and educators with meaningful information on school and district progress so they can participate in decisions to improve student learning.” This report includes performance statistics as well as demographics. The most recent Dashboard Report for Mt. Pleasant is available from 2019--statistics from 2020 have not been recorded because of the pandemic--and it identifies our enrollment at 1,271 students. Of these students, 73.5% are identified as “socioeconomically disadvantaged,” 22% are English Learners, and many are RFEP: Redesignated Fluent English Proficient. We also had 16.5% of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). At the time this data was collected, the racial makeup of the school was as follows: 1.9% African American, 17.5% Asian, 7.2% Filipino, 0.9% Two or More Races, 0.6% American Indian, 67.7% Hispanic, 1.2% Pacific Islander, and 3.1% White. The majority of our population is Hispanic, and the second largest population according to these categories is Asian. In terms of the “Academic Performance” section of the dashboard, we have seen a positive score in English Language Arts data, a negative score in Mathematics data, 42.1% English Learner Progress, and a positive score in College and Career preparedness. In 2019, Mt. Pleasant had a graduation rate of 91.4% (2).

One of the major threads throughout this unit has to do with civic education, an important facet of a “successful” democracy according to Robert. A Dahl. About the process of acquiring civic education, he asks, “In practice, how do citizens tend to acquire their civic education?...most citizens receive a level of formal education sufficient to insure literacy. Their political understanding is augmented further by the widespread

availability of relevant information that they can acquire at low cost through the media” (3). As I am asking students to reflect on their own civic education, the availability of information in their daily lives--especially political information--becomes an important topic of conversation:

“Three interrelated developments seem to be likely to render the standard solution” of civic education “seriously deficient.” One is “Communications. During the twentieth century the social and technical framework of human communication in advanced countries underwent extraordinary changes: telephone, radio, television, fax, interactive TV, the Internet, opinion surveys almost instantaneous with events, focus groups, and so on....the sheer amount of information available on political matters, at all levels of complexity, has increased enormously. Yet this increased availability of information may not lead to greater competence of heightened understanding” (4).

There is rarely a student in my classroom who does not have a smart device (or two, or three) in their possession. These devices allow students even more access to information of all kinds, even more so than Dahl outlined in his book. Various types of social media spout political information, both accurate and inaccurate, and examining censorship and information control in Orwell’s *1984* through this context allows students to reflect on their own media consumption, especially as it relates to their education in general and civic education in particular.

In the novel, Winston’s narration shows the reader his thoughts on his own perception of reality and how it has been skewed by the government: “To begin with, [Winston] did not know with any certainty that this was 1984. It must be round that date, since he was fairly sure that his age was thirty-nine, and he believed that he had been born in 1944 or 1945; but it was never possible nowadays to pin down any date within a year or two” (5). He also reflects on the wartime situation in Oceania, where he lives: “At this moment, for example...Oceania was at war with Eurasia and in alliance with Eastasia. In no public or private utterance was it ever admitted that the three powers had been grouped along different lines...Winston well knew, it was only four years since Oceania had been at war with Eastasia and in alliance with Eurasia” (6).

These conflicts--examples of DOUBLETHINK--between actual reality and the reality that has been constructed connects to the concept of democracy in general; “To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies...to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was guardian to democracy” (1984, 39). This particular example shows how the Party and its figurehead, Big Brother, are practically non-corporeal yet maintain totalitarian control over the people of Oceania. Contemplating these contradictions and connecting them to our first classwide discussion, where we examined Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, will help students grapple with and question contradictions in their own reality, such as the interwoven concepts of democracy and inequality.

### **Classroom Context**

During my time at Mt. Pleasant, I have taught seniors every year. I started with the ERWC course (Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum, designed to specifically focus on non-fiction texts and college/career writing tasks), but in the 2018-19 school year I took advantage of an opportunity to teach the AP English Literature and Composition course, which is taught exclusively to seniors. One of my goals in the AP Literature curriculum has been to balance college preparatory skills (essay writing, test taking, reading strategies, etc.) with career readiness (resume building, professional email writing, etc.) and AP testing strategies. I do not require my AP Literature students to take the AP exam, but I encourage it and we practice the skills all year because those skills can also transfer into the college readiness category of the curriculum. Additionally,

critical thinking and questioning skills--which will be practiced during this particular and throughout the rest of the year--are crucial in all areas covered by my AP Literature curriculum: college and career readiness, literary analysis, and preparation for the AP exam.

In the past, I have only taught *1984* by George Orwell as a summer read and instead focused on *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley during the school year. However, I have found that in my multiple readings of *1984* as well as feedback from students that the novel has many themes worth exploring through the lenses of both history and current events, including the dangers of totalitarianism, psychological manipulation, control of information, rewriting history, technology, language as mind control, loyalty, resistance and revolution, and independence and identity. I plan to teach *Brave New World* after *1984* during the upcoming school year, and I hope to spark conversations comparing the two dystopian viewpoints. These topics are important to my students because they live on the side of the disenfranchised, lower side of the socio-economic system. In addition to this context, students in my classes are constantly on their cell phones or other devices, hence engaging with the manipulation, control, and rewriting that goes on every time they scroll through social media, as mentioned above.

In my AP Literature and Composition class during the upcoming school year, this curriculum unit will be taught during the first grading period of the semester as the first full-class text, and it will include supplementary lessons in which students will learn about literary terms, poetry analysis, and essay writing in addition to what I am about to outline for this unit.

## Content Matter Discussion

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As a lifelong learner, I am appreciative that the “Democracy and Inequality” seminar is outside of my wheelhouse as it is a political science course and I was an English Education major in college. I felt that it would be an excellent opportunity for me to learn something new and incorporate interdisciplinary teaching and learning into my lesson plans, especially for the AP class.

One of the skills that students need for approaching the AP Literature exam--which would also be beneficial in college-level thinking and analysis--is recognizing the larger context of a fictional text. This can include the historical context, biographical context of the author, political context, social context, etc., and many of these intersect with one another. On the AP Literature exam, students can elevate their writing--hence earning a “sophistication point” on an essay--by exploring the significance of a text within a larger context, and this lesson will provide students the opportunity to practice this kind of thinking while reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

I wanted to use Orwell himself as the lens through which we would connect the fictional text of *1984* with the factual situation of his life experience and the socio-political realities that he observed in the world around him. Exploring these connections also provides an opportunity for students to understand why we study literature in the first place: it speaks truths about both the historical and current issues that influence the human experience.

One example of this in texts that we will study includes Orwell’s description of the Spanish Civil War in his nonfiction novel, *Homage to Catalonia*: “It was an extraordinary life that we were living--an extraordinary way

to be at war, if you could call it war” (8). His acknowledgement of the war that did not seem like a realistic war is reflected in the dropping of rocket bombs in Oceania: faint indications of a war that may or may not be taking place with foreign powers. It appears that his final opinion on the matter, in Spain, is “Now that I had seen the front I was profoundly disgusted. They called this war! And we were hardly even in touch with the enemy!” (9). Attempts to incorporate the revolutionary mindset into a military setting seemed futile, especially when it came to proper training and discipline. “Actually, a newly raised draft ‘of militia was an undisciplined mob not because officers called the private ‘Comrade’ but because raw troops were always an undisciplined mob. In practice the democratic ‘revolutionary’ type of discipline is more reliable than might be expected. In a workers’ army discipline is theoretically voluntary” (10). How could a military force function like that, let alone win a war and later spark a revolution against the government in power?

## Teaching Strategies

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We simply do not have enough class time for students to fully engage in the reading process, so I will establish a practice of having students read as homework. The hope is that students will learn the importance of accountability for learning that goes beyond the classroom. All other assignments will happen in class, unless a student needs additional time to complete an assignment, in which case the student would have to work on the assignment at home. However, Mt. Pleasant has after-school support with tutoring through Goodwill Assets, the Cardinal Writing Center, and other after school supports on campus. Students will have their own chromebooks provided by the school, but they will also keep a physical notebook for my class specifically. This will be the first year in which I will employ a hybrid system of instruction, but it feels like a natural transition from distance learning in 2020 and 2021.

Teaching strategies, which are also outlined throughout the three major parts of the lesson, include the following:

### Highlighting and Annotating

At Mt. Pleasant High School, we have a specific protocol on how students should highlight and annotate a text, which students have been taught to do in previous English classes. For instance, vocabulary is highlighted in purple and defined in the margin. I use these highlighting strategies and colors myself as a model, but in AP Literature I encourage students to either use these guidelines or find another annotation method. In this way, I hope to encourage students to think about what annotation strategies--and learning strategies in general--work best for them as many of them will enter college the following year.

### Modeling

This instructional move involves me modeling the processes for completing a task. One example is analyzing “The New Colossus” as a class while showing the writing on the SmartBoard so that students can see how to do it, especially if any student is having difficulty doing it themselves. This will be especially important following a year and a half of distance learning, where students may not have been sharpening certain skills because they felt unsupported and isolated in their learning. Eventually students will take on the role of modeling the task completion process for their classmates/peers so that I can then take on a more facilitative role and model as needed.

## **Think-Pair-Share**

Students turn to talk to their table partners about a particular prompt (the desks in my classroom are arranged in pairs). This allows students to share aloud without speaking to the whole class, and it helps students gather their thoughts and practice expressing them before a whole class discussion. Students will also receive insight and feedback from their partner that can contribute to their thinking and learning process.

## **Online Research**

An important skill I teach in all my classes is showing students how to determine a reliable source of information, engage in the process of finding credible information on the internet, and cite their sources accurately so as to avoid plagiarism. The Scavenger Hunt gives them an opportunity to practice this skill without the task being high stakes, like as a research essay.

## **Technology Integration**

Transitioning out of distance learning, I want to incorporate the technology I used during distance learning into the traditional classroom environment. Each student will have their own ChromeBook, but they will also have physical notebooks for my class. This hybrid setup will help students transition into the traditional setting without abandoning the platforms on which they were learning during the past one and a half years. Programs I will use include Google Classroom (for communication and posting activities that are not in the notebook), Pear Deck (where students can interact with direct instruction slides and become more involved in their own learning), and Jamboard (where students can share answers so they all can see without cluttering the actual boards with post-its).

## **Fishbowl Discussion**

A Fishbowl Discussion has four students in the middle of the classroom who are mainly involved in the discussion with a fifth seat that can be occupied by anybody outside the Fishbowl who wants to contribute a single point or counterargument to the discussion. I am purposely choosing this format because during distance learning, class discussions were basically nonexistent, and jumping right into a traditional, whole class, formal discussion would be difficult for students who have not practiced that skill. Students will also be provided with sentence starters for discussions in particular, which will also provide scaffolding for the activity. We will use this format for the “Writing as a Revolutionary Act” activity and discussion.

## **Expository Paragraph, also known as an Analysis Paragraph**

This paragraph can stand alone or serve as a body paragraph within an essay, so it is a writing structure that we practice throughout the year. In my pedagogical discussions, I refer to it as an expository paragraph, but to the students I call it an analysis paragraph to emphasize the focus on analyzing the text or issue. At Mt. Pleasant, we teach paragraph writing using a mnemonic device: “The two sexy elephants sold cotton candy,” which stands for “topic,” “topic sentence” that introduces the claim, “explanation,” “support with evidence” that has a quote or paraphrase, “commentary” which provides analysis, and “clincher.”

## Into the Text

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### Excerpts from 1984

In the beginning of *1984*, there's an extensive scene in which Winston has purchased a notebook and writing supplies, and he has decided to do something that his government does *not* want him to do--to keep a diary. "This was not illegal (nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any laws), but if detected it was reasonably certain that it would be punished by death, or at least by twenty-five years in a forced-labour camp" (11). Together, we are going to do close reading of a few passages in which Winston references his use of the diary, including his defiant act of writing "DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER" multiple times and committing "Thoughtcrime." The concept of Winston committing Thoughtcrime by writing in a book shows the power of writing as a revolutionary act, especially in the setting of the story in which the character Winston lives.

Students will read and annotate the printed excerpts and answer the following prompt in their notebooks: "After reading these excerpts from the beginning of the novel, analyze the implication of the act that Winston commits. What is the action, and why is it significant to him?" Once students have gathered their thoughts, students would share in pairs and contribute to a Jamboard discussion--adding virtual post-its to a board that the whole class has access to-- before an informal class discussion on the topic where students could share their thoughts out loud.

This activity and discussion would happen before students begin reading the book for two reasons: first, students will get a taste of Orwell's writing style in a whole-class activity; second, we will be able to place emphasis on a theme that we will revisit later as a class multiple times. Orwell's important theme of committing revolutionary acts connects deeply to his portrayal of the inequality between those who are in power and those who are not, which is clearly shown through the portrayal of the proles, but is also shown in the portrayal of those who are in the "upper class" parties as well.

### "It's All Political" and "The New Colossus"

First, as a preview of the focus we will utilize in this unit, we will read a quote from *How to Read Literature Like a Professor (For Kids)*, specifically Chapter 12: "It's All Political." The author clarifies that "What I mean by 'political' is writing that thinks about human problems, about how human beings in groups get along, about the rights individuals possess (or should), and about the wrongs committed by those in power" (12), and that is the framework within which I want my students to think about *1984*.

However, first we will practice applying this idea to a smaller text--the poem "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus--to briefly discuss immigration issues in the United States. The first essay type that we will be writing in the class will be poetry analysis, taught alongside the *1984* content, and analyzing this poem according to the following prompt: "Analyze the statement that Lazarus is making in her poem using imagery and dialogue." will prepare them for the poetry analysis essay as well as practice applying a political lens to a text.

This activity will be printed out, and students will annotate the poem in their notebooks, identifying imagery and dialogue. Then, students will create an over-arching question: for example, the prompt will become "How does Lazarus use imagery and dialogue to make a statement in the poem, and what is that statement?" Students will then come up with a thesis that answers both the prompt and over-arching question. The question will help guide them to clearer thesis statements that actually answer the prompt. Finally, students



will write down evidence and analysis that supports their thesis statements. Once students have worked on their own, we will work together as a class to repeat the process, especially to model for students who may not know how to approach the poem on their own at this point in the school year.

Analyzing the statement that “The New Colossus” is making--which may be found by students to be political, especially because it concerns immigration--will help students both prepare to write that essay and practice applying socio-political analysis to another, shorter text. Then, once students have applied this framework to “The New Colossus,” we will shift our focus to Orwell.

## Scavenger Hunt

Before we dive into the main text, my students and I will investigate George Orwell’s biographical information and historical context as well as different types of government. Students will complete a scavenger hunt investigating these concepts before we discuss them as a class, utilizing research and citation skills as they practice finding information rather than copying it down from a slide provided by the teacher. Texts that would be made available to students would include Orwell’s essays “The Lion and the Unicorn” and “Why I Write.” This will help students connect the concept of political commentary to the specific political landscape about which Orwell was writing, whether directly or indirectly.

The scavenger hunt itself includes the following directions: “Before we begin reading, we are going to do some research on George Orwell, the historical context in which he was writing, and general information about different government systems. Make sure to write in complete sentences and cite your sources. You can use direct quotes or paraphrase.” Prompts include, among others:

- When did George Orwell live?
- List three major historical events that occurred during Orwell’s lifetime.
- About what historical event is Orwell’s book, *Homage to Catalonia*?
- What does “Orwellian” mean?
- Summarize one of the six steps towards English Socialism that Orwell describes in “The Lion and the Unicorn.”
- What are the four reasons why people write, according to Orwell?
- Define the following forms of government: totalitarianism, authoritarianism, monarchy, oligarchy, republic, direct democracy, anarchy, socialism, and fascism.

Making these connections is again imperative to the idea that there are texts that have significance within a larger context (sociopolitical, biographical, historical, etc.). To share answers, I will assign pairs of students to create a slide for each of the answers. Then, when the slides have been fact checked, we will compile the slides and share them with the rest of the class. This will serve as a way for students to correct their own scavenger hunt activities.

## Through the Text

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### 1984 Film (1956)

As we proceed with reading the novel, we will periodically watch parts of the 1956 black and white film

version of 1984, which is available on YouTube. These viewings will be broken up by the three parts of the novel that are indicated in the text itself: Book One, which has eight chapters; Book 2, which has ten chapters; and Book 3, which has six chapters. This will break up the readings and provide students with a visual representation of the novel to supplement their understanding and interpretation of the text.

## About the Spanish Civil War

Now that students have done some research on their own, I will engage in some direct instruction specifically about the Spanish Civil War. Orwell himself participated in this war, and it is the topic of his novel *Homage to Catalonia*, of which we will explore excerpts together. Because this war is not one of the more famous ones, I will provide students with general information about the time period and socio-political situation. We will especially focus on which side of the war Orwell was fighting; this will frame their understanding of *Homage to Catalonia* as well as Orwell's perspective in this nonfiction text.

Orwell states that, "At the beginning I had ignored the political side of the war, and it was only about this time that it began to force itself upon my attention...It was above all things a political war...is intelligible unless one has some grasp of the inter-party struggle that was going on behind the Government lines" (13). Although he joined for non-political reasons, Orwell realized that there was no way to avoid the political influences on the beginning of the war and the subsequent portrayal throughout Europe. He adds, "If you had asked me why I had joined the militia I should have answered 'To fight against Fascism,' and if you asked me what I was fighting for, I should have answered 'Common decency'...The revolutionary atmosphere of Barcelona had attracted me deeply, but I had made no attempt to understand it" (14). In this novel, Orwell engages in a discussion of the political undertones throughout the entirety of Chapter 5.

He discusses the factions on his own side of the fight, referencing an alphabet soup of organizations: "the kaleidoscope of political parties and trade unions, with their tiresome names--P.S.U.C., P.O.U.M., F.A.I, C.N.T., U.G.T., J.C.I., J.S.U., A.I.T....It looked at first sight as though Spain were suffering from a plague of initials" (15). Orwell continues by characterizing those on the "revolutionary" side of the fight against the Fascists:

"I knew I was serving in something called the P.O.U.M. ...but I did not realize that there were serious differences between the political parties... 'Those are the socialists' (meaning the P.S.U.C.), I was puzzled and said, 'Aren't we all socialists?' I thought it idiotic that people fighting for their lives should have separate parties; my attitude always was 'Why can't we drop all this political nonsense and get on with the war? This of course was the correct 'anti-Fascist' attitude which had been carefully disseminated by the English newspapers, largely in order to prevent people from grasping the real nature of the struggle" (16).

"From the point of view of political theory there were only three parties that mattered, the P.S.U.C., the P.O.U.M., and the C.N.T.-F.A.I., loosely described as the Anarchists...when one speaks of the P.S.U.C 'line' one really means the Communist Party 'line'...the P.S.U.C. (Partido Socialista Unificado de Cataluna) was the Socialist Party of Catalonia...The P.O.U.M. (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista) was one of those dissident Communist parties...a result of the opposition to 'Stalinism'; i.e. to the change, real or apparent, in Communist policy...The Anarchist view point is less easily defined" (17).

In Ian Shapiro's seminar, "Democracy and Inequality," we discussed how coalitions can create complications in enacting major change in any large-scale system (18). In this case, the different subdivisions within the anti-Fascist movement was a major cause of the ineffectiveness of their war against the existing powers in



Spain as perceived by Orwell. He realized that unifying ideals were not enough to carry a revolution forward because it was impossible to get everyone on the same page in execution of those ideals.

However, many portrayals of the war were attempts to simplify the issue in order to conceal the revolutionary nature of the fight: “The issue had been narrowed down to ‘Fascism versus democracy’ and the revolutionary aspect concealed as much as possible” (19), especially in the English papers that Orwell had been reading back home. Within his side of the fight, factions were forming, and they were attacking one another in the available media: “Meanwhile there was the diabolical inter-party feud that was going on in the newspapers, in pamphlets, on posters, in books” (20), which pitted these groups against one another. He expresses disappointment as the revolution appeared to die out, “But, after all, [the war] was only the beginning of a revolution, not the complete thing. Even when the workers, certainly in Catalonia and possibly elsewhere, had the power to do so, they did not overthrow or completely replace the Government” (21). From Orwell’s perspective, this was a failure.

Slides about the historical context of the Spanish Civil War and Orwell’s take on it will be presented to students in the form of a Pear Deck, and they will be taking notes in their physical notebooks as well as interacting with the slides. There will also be an additional mini-documentary provided in Google Classroom about the Spanish Civil war for students who have a particular interest in the history of this event.

### **Homage to Catalonia Excerpts**

Students will read two excerpts from *Homage to Catalonia*. First, they will read Chapter 1, which introduces Orwell as a player in the war itself and provides an examination of the Spanish people, which foreshadows their difficulties later in the novel. However, this chapter also shows several positives of the socialist ideals that have been put into action on a smaller scale. Second, they will read Chapter 5, where Orwell pauses to provide a description of the political situation in the Spanish Civil War as well as the fragmentation on his own side of the war, which was an important part of his growing disbelief in the ability of socialism and anarchism to create a successful revolution. He sees that his side has already fragmented as they are trying to fight this seemingly hopeless war. I will also provide a PDF of the whole text in Google Classroom for students who are interested in reading it.

Then, students will begin gathering evidence together as they decide what they believe to be Orwell’s viewpoint on the war as well as his own involvement and experience in the war. This will take place as a Jamboard discussion, where students will create virtual post-its with their own opinions on a collective virtual whiteboard. This will allow students to read the responses of their peers, and we will have an informal classwide discussion on this topic as well.

### **Writing as a Revolutionary Act**

In Orwell’s own essay, he wrote that two of the reasons people write are for “Historical impulse” and “Political purpose” (22) and we will discuss whether Winston is doing one, the other, or both in these particular passages. We will also discuss the overarching concept of whether writing is indeed a revolutionary act, even in our reality, and connect it to the concept of reading being a revolutionary act in *Fahrenheit 451*, which we will have examined in part at the beginning of the semester for the students who did not do the optional summer reading of the novel. The question we will explore, in the form of a journal followed by a Fishbowl Discussion, is as follows:

- Orwell suggests that one reason that people write is for “political purpose”: does this make writing a

revolutionary act? Why or why not? Use evidence from the text, your own experience, or another source to support your argument.

- The Fishbowl Discussion prompt will be a statement for students to agree or disagree with: Orwell suggests that one reason people write is for “political purpose,” but writing is not a revolutionary act.

The journal will be completed in student notebooks with ample time for students to gather evidence; when students are writing journals, they will not know who will be participating in the actual Fishbowl. Students participating in the Fishbowl will be chosen based on anonymous students volunteering or my encouragement to volunteer, which will be brought up during a private conversation with the student.

## The Proles

Next, we will turn our attention to the proles, the lower class of people in the society of *1984*. Personally, as I listened to *1984* during the summer of the initial lockdown of the 2020 pandemic, I was shocked at how absolutely they were mirroring issues that I was observing in the world outside. Even seventy-one years after its publication, many themes in this book unfortunately ring true. The world of *1984* serves as a metaphor for the systemic oppression that is still present in America today. I, like Winston, saw the proles as a symbol of hope. Winston concludes that, “If there was hope, it MUST lie with the proles...85 per cent of Oceania...But the proles, if only they could somehow become conscious of their own strength, would have no need to conspire. They needed only to rise up and shake themselves like a horse shaking off flies” (23). Despite our faith in the proles, they would be unable to achieve the awareness needed to rebel, according to Winston. This is why education is so important in our own society, an idea that I want to revisit after we finish the novel. With the aforementioned quote in mind, I will ask students to work in pairs to answer the following question:

- Does this quote apply to the world today? Why or why not? Use an example from recent or current events to support your argument.

Then, we will tag responses by creating a list on the board as a class while we discuss the connections we see between the proles in the novel and recent or current events.

Winston sees that the proles are distracted systemically by the media. At his work, the Ministry of Truth, “There was a whole chain of separate departments dealing with proletarian literature, music, drama, and entertainment generally. Here were produced rubbishy newspapers containing almost nothing except sport, crime and astrology, sensational five-cent novelettes, films oozing with sex, and sentimental songs” (24). The proles are fed sensationalized content, unlike the news articles that Winston and his department work on (which are falsified themselves and is a whole separate issue), and hence the proles are completely unaware of any semblance of what is going on in the world of Oceania, true or false. This is like a student scrolling through TikTok or Instagram under their desk while an educator is attempting to provide them education. To many students, the educator will not likely be more interesting than the content through which they are scrolling on their phones, but I would argue that education is the more powerful of the two inputs--perhaps Orwell would make that argument as well.

Additionally, there is a lack of awareness of social problems from this same metaphorical student who is glued to their phone, and there are certainly social problems to discuss in any community, especially at our school. Like the proles in *1984*, most of my students in the community that attends Mt. Pleasant are in the lower class, and hence will likely draw parallels between their own experiences and what has been experienced by the proles and even the Party members who are suppressed by Big Brother. Many of my students have the experience of specific issues firsthand, such as poverty, hunger, racial discrimination, gender discrimination,

and of course class discrimination and stereotyping. This will help solidify those connections and fuel the drive to propose possible solutions later in the unit.

### **Government Systems in 1984**

As we had examined the types of government before we started reading, I would ask students to reflect on their notes and discuss what kind of government is present in *1984* and how it is subjugating its citizens, both the proles and even the more elite Party members. Is this a true totalitarian system, or is it a totalitarian system attempting to masquerade as a democracy? Even in advanced democracies such as our own, there is a disturbing correlation between the passage of time and the amount of inequality.

There has been a clear pattern between what is viewed as “progress” in civilization and the presence of inequality. One historical transition took place during “The Industrial Revolution, beginning in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, initiated the economic growth that has been responsible for hundreds of millions of people escaping from material deprivation,” but along with this beacon of progress came what was known as the ‘Great Divergence,’ when Britain, followed a little later by northwestern Europe and North America, pulled away from the rest of the world, creating the enormous gulf between the West and the rest that has not closed to this day. Today’s global inequality was, to a large extent, created by the success of modern economic growth” (25). These seemingly conflicting realities look disturbingly like the conflicting realities within the society of *1984*, even if they are not entirely parallel issues. However, even though the novel features structured inequality (there’s Big Brother, the inner Party, the Party, and then the proles beneath everyone else), it has similar characteristics to the upper, middle, and lower class strata that we have in many of our current democratic societies. Then, once students have established their thoughts about the fictional government, we would connect those oppressive systems to ones that are present in our reality today in the form of a Jamboard matching activity as well as an expository paragraph.

Students would be working in a Jamboard on Google Classroom in which they would have an assortment of images/words associated with the various systems of government. Once students have matched the system to the world of *1984*, students would compose an expository paragraph in the space provided beneath the matching section. Including a matching element in the activity appeals to visual and kinesthetic learners, which will account for most students in the classroom. In a separate activity, we will have already reviewed the structure of an expository paragraph.

### **Animal Farm**

A mini-lesson incorporated into the “through” portion of the unit would be a book recommendation, which I plan to do throughout the year, but this recommendation would be for George Orwell’s novella *Animal Farm*. Even in striving for socialist-style equality, the animals naturally find themselves unequal: one of the rules painted on the wall in the barn says “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” We would examine a passage together and explore some connecting themes--revisiting the idea of governments, inequality, cruelty, etc.--and I would encourage students to choose it as independent reading, especially if they had a particular interest in history.

### **Notes on Civic Education**

After we finish reading *1984*, we would have a more in-depth discussion of the role of education, especially considering what we examined before and throughout the text itself. This goes back to the idea of Civic Education, as mentioned by Dahl in *On Democracy*: “One basic criterion for a democratic process is

enlightened understanding: within reasonable limits as to time, each member (citizen) must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences” (26). We will consider this statement from both the viewpoint of the novel as well as students’ own perceptions, and this will serve as a transition from reading the text and exploring the issues to writing about possible solutions.

## Beyond the Text

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### Final Task: Possible Solutions

The culminating task for this unit will emulate the idea of “possible solutions”: students will think about the problem of inequality as it is presented in *1984* and come up with their own possible solution. I want to focus our “possible solutions” discussion on the concept of education, especially because we would have already discussed the concept of Civic Education.

As I was reading *The Prize* by Dale Rusakoff, I was struck by the following excerpt that described a politician’s view on Newark public school students:

“In 1967, Governor Richard Hughes appointed a commission to investigate the causes of the riots. Its report stated, of urban renewal, ‘In the scramble for money, the poor, who were to be the chief beneficiaries of the programs, tended to be overlooked.’ And, because of “ghetto schools,” most poor and black children ‘have no hope in the present situation. A few may succeed in spite of the barriers. The majority will not. Society cannot afford to have such human potential to go to waste” (27).

Despite the fact that this description is about Newark, New Jersey students, I have heard people express similar sentiments about Mt. Pleasant High School--including a teacher at the school. There are adults who do not believe that students from certain areas are capable of achieving academically, and that is true of opinions about my own school. This idea is so ingrained that many Mt. Pleasant students think this way about themselves. Many have a fixed mindset, and I hope that this focus on education as a force for change asks my students to employ more of a growth mindset as they think about fictional--and factual--solutions to problems.

There will be multiple options for students to communicate their possible solutions; including writing a chapter that represents an alternative ending to the novel, creating a propaganda poster to inspire the characters to do something, writing a letter to the government proposing a reason and way for them to change the system, etc. Options will be presented to students in the form of a menu from which they will be able to choose how they complete the final task.

After students have explored possible solutions and applied them to *1984*, they will complete a reflective journal activity in which they think about the solution that they chose and whether or not it would work for any real world issues, especially the ones we brainstormed as a class and tagged on the whiteboard, which would still be displayed. Students would think about how they would have to adapt or change their possible solutions, how similar the issues are between fiction and reality, and how to enact possible change in the future, even on a smaller scale than improving an entire society or government.

## Conclusion

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Asking students to grapple with a text as well as its context and the attitudes of its author in their thoughts and analysis is asking them to employ deeper depth-of-knowledge thinking, and connecting fictional literature to factual situations will also challenge their critical thinking skills. I could ask them to regurgitate obscure facts from *1984* or memorize the definitions of different government systems, but creating those connections through discussion and writing will help them practice more complex thinking across disciplines.

Despite setbacks in her personal life, Williams shared in *The Prize* that “‘I think a lot about what distinguished me from my friends who became statistics,’ [Williams] said. ‘Yes, I saw people get shot. Yes, I saw people get arrested in my own family. But I never had a teacher say, “I’m going to expect less of you because of what you’re going through.” We have to say, “We understand this is very hard for you, but we’re not going to use that as an excuse to hold you to a lower standard, and you can’t allow it to make you lower your own standards for yourself”’ (28). While I as their teacher cannot change the home or social situation of a student in my class, I can encourage them to examine everything around them with a critical eye and to challenge themselves to rise above setbacks. They have already done this by signing up for my AP class in the first place, so I hope to support my students as they continue to engage in their own civic education.

My primary concern is for the wellbeing of my students, and this may be seen as an anti-academic attitude. However, in *The Great Escape*, Angus Deaton uses “the term *wellbeing* to refer to all the things that are good for a person, that makes for a good life. Wellbeing includes material wellbeing, such as income and wealth; physical and psychological wellbeing, represented by health and happiness; and education and the ability to participate in civil society through democracy and the rule of law” (29). Hence, engaging my students in a rigorous education is adding to their wellbeing just as much as acknowledging their mental health needs, for instance. Keeping the thread of civic education and education in general as a focus for the curriculum unit will underscore the connection between *1984* and injustices perceived in the world around us. Overall in my English classes, I want students to take what they have learned and think about how these lessons apply to real world situations. One main theme in my instruction in all classes is that I want my students to question the things, people, and systems around them.

Indeed, if Orwell’s sentiment as expressed through Winston is correct that “Nothing” truly is “your own except the few cubic centimeters in your skull” (30), fostering those critical thinking and analytical questioning skills that allow students to harness those “few cubic centimeters” to enact change in the face of the injustice of inequality is our most important mission as a classroom community.

## Notes

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1. Orwell, George (1949). *Nineteen eighty-four*. London: Penguin Books in association with Secker and Warburg, 30
2. Department of Education for the State of California. *California School Dashboard*. 2017, Accessed July 19, 2021, <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/>.
3. Dahl, Robert A. *On Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998, 185
4. *Ibid*, 187

5. Orwell, 1984, 9
6. Ibid, 38
7. Ibid, 39
8. Orwell, George (1838). *Homage to Catalonia*, 22
9. Ibid, 15
10. Ibid, 19
11. Orwell, 1984, 8
12. Foster, Thomas. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, 68
13. Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, 33
14. Ibid, 33
15. Ibid, 34
16. Ibid, 34
17. Ibid, 42-44
18. Ian Shapiro, presentation on “Democracy and Inequality,” Yale National Initiative, April 30, 2021
19. Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, 36
20. Ibid, 45
21. Ibid, 37
22. Orwell, George (1946). “Why I Write.” *Gangrel*, No. 4, Summer 1946.
23. Orwell, 1984, 78
24. Ibid, 46
25. Deaton, Angus. *The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality*, 4
26. Dahl, *On Democracy*, 185
27. Russakoff, Dale (2015). *The Prize*. Boston: Mariner Books Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 18-19
28. Ibid, 40
29. Deaton, *The Great Escape*, 24
30. Orwell, 1984, 30

## Annotated Bibliography

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Department of Education for the State of California. *California School Dashboard*. 2017, Accessed July 19, 2021, <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/>.

Dahl, Robert A. *On Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998. This will be the main source of information about democracy as an institution; it provides insight about the history of democratic rules and provides information about the “requirements” for a democracy to form and work.

Deaton, Angus. *The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality*. Princeton: Princeton Press, 2013. This novel explores the concept of inequality, especially in different areas such as health and wealth, including inequalities between and within countries.

Foster, Thomas. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*.

Ian Shapiro, presentation on “Democracy and Inequality,” Yale National Initiative, April 30, 2021.

Orwell, George (1954). *Animal Farm*. Harlow: Longman. *Animal Farm* is an allegory that reflects the events



that lead up to the Russian Revolution, which historically reflects a socialist ideal that morphed into an actual dictatorship.

Orwell, George (1938). *Homage to Catalonia*. *Homage to Catalonia* is as close as one can get to an autobiography about Orwell; it chronicles his involvement in the military during the Spanish Civil War.

Orwell, George (1946). "The Lion and the Unicorn." *Gangrel*, No. 4, Summer 1946

This is an essay about Orwell's own thoughts about Britain during World War II.

Orwell, George (1949). *Nineteen eighty-four*. London: Penguin Books in association with Secker and Warburg. *Nineteen eighty-four* will be the focus text for the unit I am presenting to my AP English Literature and Composition class.

Orwell, George (1946). "Why I Write." *Gangrel*, No. 4, Summer 1946. This essay is more autobiographical in nature; Orwell discusses the purpose of and motives for his writing in general.

Russakoff, Dale (2015). *The Prize*. Boston: Mariner Books Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

*The Prize* describes two different movements to revolutionize education in Newark, New Jersey: one from the top with wealthy benefactors and applying a business model to the school system, another from the bottom focusing on professional development for teachers and individualized instruction for students.

## Appendix on Implementing District Standards

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1. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts > Reading: Literature 11-12.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts > Writing 11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
3. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts > Writing 11-12.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
4. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts > Writing 11-12.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
5. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts > Speaking and Listening 11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
6. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts > History and Social Studies > 11-12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

7. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts > History and Social Studies > 11-12.7:  
Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

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